BEHIND THE MONOCLE

BY J.S. FLETCHER

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BEHIND THE MONOCLE

BOOKS BY

J. S. FLETCHER

BEHIND THE MONOCLE

THE HEAVEN-SENT WITNESS AND OTHER STORIES

PERRIS OF THE CHERRY-TREES

THE QUEEN OF A DAY

A MAID AND HER MONEY

THE WILD OAT

PARADISE COURT

THE BLACK HOUSE IN HARLEY STREET

THE PINFOLD

I'D VENTURE ALL FOR THEE

HARDICAN'S HOLLOW

THE HARVEST MOON

DANIEL QUAYNE

MARCHESTER ROYAL

THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL

MILL OF MANY WINDOWS

THE VALLEY OF HEADSTRONG MEN

SECRET OF THE BARBICAN

THE HEAVEN KISSED HILL

THE COPPER BOX

BEHIND THE MONOCLE

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

J. S. FLETCHER

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BEHIND THE MONOCLE

I

TRADING OUT OF GALWAY INTO SPAIN

1 *The Man Who Came into the Shebeen*

To START with, the whole thing arose—so far as I am concerned—out of a simple fact. This fact—I was clear of Deasy. Deasy was an arrant humbug, a liar, no gentleman: Deasy had put an advertisement in an English paper which was packed as full of lies as a good egg is of sound meat.

> Required [said Deasy's advertisement] at a high-class educational establishment near Galway, in Ireland, a young gentleman competent to teach Latin, mathematics, and the piano. Magnificent scenery, salubrious air, home comforts, and a liberal salary.

A desire to see something of Ireland led me to answer that advertisement. Deasy snapped me up as a Shannon salmon snaps at a particularly taking boiled prawn on a Limerick bend: before I knew where I was I found myself at Ballytober Academy, and discovered Deasy to be as thoroughgoing a prevaricator as ever was unconscious of his own shortcomings in that way. The whole thing was a fraud—except for the salubrious air and the magnificent scenery. The high-class educational establishment was a big, rambling, half-furnished utterly dirty house, to which some fifteen or twenty

boys, sons of small farmers and tradesmen, came for such learning as they could get; the home comforts were bad food, dirty beds, and small accommodation of soap and water. As for the liberal salary, that certainly looked all right on paper, but, as I never saw sign or vestige of it in concrete form, there is no need to say more about it. Deasy, in short, was a humbug of the Squeers type—he only differed from Squeers in respect of the fact that he was too lazy to be cruel. His notion of things was that I—his one assistant—should teach the young gentlemen—save us!—all day out of their dog-eared, out-of-date books, leaving him entirely free to smoke black twist and drink whisky. He was always soaked in whisky—that, maybe, caused his utter obtuseness and imperviousness. And, by the Black Thief of King Conal, I had had enough of Deasy and his high-class establishment before a week was out! All the same, I stood it for a month—after which, finding that I was losing flesh, and that it was the rule to give out clean bed linen at very wide-spaced intervals, I marched one morning into Deasy's study—a miserable dog-hole—and told him a few plain truths.

"Mr. Deasy," said I, when I could get his attention away from a fresh-opened bottle of whisky which he was unsteadily pouring into a time-stained decanter, "you are not treating me well. You have deceived me. Your establishment is not high-class—it isn't even third-class. There's not a textbook in the place that isn't twenty years old, nor one that can show all its leaves. Your house is dirty, and I don't get enough to eat. All this isn't in keeping with the terms of my engagement, Mr. Deasy. You've broken your contract."

Deasy gave me a queer stare, and pushed the replenished decanter in my direction with one hand while

he reached for a glass with the other. He had grand notions of hospitality in that way, I'll say that for him. But no wise man drinks on an empty stomach, and mine at best was but a quarter filled, as usual. I shoved the decanter back to him.

"I'm going, Mr. Deasy," I said. "I've had enough—more than enough. I'm going now. Will you pay me a month's salary?"

"I will not!" said he.

"I didn't think you would," said I. "So I'm prepared for you. I ought to take the law of you for a good many things—that and my fare from England, which you promised to pay, and sixteen shillings and ninepence, which I laid out for you in the town. You won't pay me that, either?"

"I will not!" he declared.

"Then drink yourself to death and be hanged to you, Mr. Deasy!" said I, and turned out into the hall, where I had my portmanteau and a knapsack already handy.

He flung his glass after me as I went, but it only hit the door with a sweet crash that mingled pleasantly with the thrower's curses. I took no heed of either, nor of the weight of my portmanteau; I was a strong and hefty chap in those days, despite Deasy's bad feeding, and I soon carried the portmanteau down the hillside to a sympathetic soul who promised to ride it into Galway on his ass-cart and send it off by rail to Dublin.

As for me, I was going that way afoot. There were good reasons for that. The best was that I was scarcely twenty years old, a great, long-limbed, square-shouldered chap, strong as a horse, to whom a leisurely jaunt across the Irish midlands in glorious summer weather was just the thing to appeal strongly; the other was that I had not too much money about my person. I had anticipated

Deasy's failure to pay up, and had purposely refrained from spending what cash I had brought on me from England; nevertheless, a couple of sovereigns and a bit of loose silver was all I possessed when I stepped out from the academy. I was not going to spend that in train fares or in hotel bills—a bed in the heather would do for me, and I could live on bread and bacon until I struck Dublin, to say nothing of the good tea and sound porter that you can always rely on in Ireland. And I had a last resource in the shape of my dead father's old gold watch; if need arose, I would pawn that to pay my passage from Kingstown to England. It was with a light heart, then, that I strode out on that hundred-and-twenty-mile walk from west to east. Deasy and his dirty ménage faded away with the first breath of free air—it is wonderful how bright life looks when liberty, an open road, and a bit of money about you are your enviable portion.

I had an old road map of Ireland in the pocket of my Norfolk jacket, and I had worked out my route before taking the definite step which gave me my freedom. Athenry — Ballinaslow — Tullamore — Dublin — those were the main points; I would take four days to the doing of it, and if I liked I would turn aside here and there and take more. The great thing was that I was my own master. I sang and whistled and laughed as I turned away from the big Atlantic, shoving its rollers into Galway Bay—what I wished to see in due course was the narrower expanse of St. George's Channel. For after my experience with Deasy I had a good desire for the English fleshpots, and I had lately suffered much from dreams of English roast beef and sound English ale. I would set my teeth in one and tickle my palate with the other within a week, and——

But, as luck would have it, I did not see England within a week, nor Dublin on the fiftieth day of my flight; I did not even make Athenry the first stage, as I had meant to do ere the first night fell. In fact, I never got well away from Galway itself, as I shall now proceed to show.

It was half-past nine o'clock in the morning of a smiling June day when I set out from the place where I left my portmanteau, and went off, knapsack on back, toward Oranmore. By twelve o'clock I was well on my road; also, by that time I was hungry. And coming to a sort of wayside tavern, which was not quite the usual grocery, where they sell tea at one counter and liquor at the other—it seemed indeed to be much more like a shebeen than anything licensed—I went in and held talk with the woman of the house as to the prospect of getting food. She had good bread and a piece of fat, streaky bacon in cut; I got a great handful of both, and a big mug of porter, and sat down amid fowls, pigs, and fleas to refresh.

It was while I was thus engaged that the big man came to the shebeen. He drove up alone in a motor car, got out of it, and walked in, and he seemed so big that when he was once inside he gave you the idea that he filled the whole place. He was easily the biggest man I ever saw—six-foot-seven in height, and of a corresponding breadth; a handsome man, too, that made you think of the old Norsemen, for he had a great, sweeping, fair moustache, and bright blue eyes, and a grand aquiline nose and square chin, and his loose tweed suit failed to obscure his splendid figure. I stared at him as I would have stared at some fine animal.

The woman of the house evidently knew him, for she hastened to produce a bottle of special whisky and

another of mineral water—wonderful what good liquor of the best you can always get in Ireland, even in the most unlikely places!—and he helped himself to a long drink, and looked at me over the rim of his glass as he took the first gulp. And that done, he sat himself down on the edge of the table and swung one of his long legs and looked me all over as if I were some horse that he thought of buying. And it suddenly struck me—though I was very far from being a conceited young fellow, I assure you—that he was admiring me as much as I admired him.

"Tourist?" he asked, with an abruptness which was polite enough. "Having a look round?"

"After a fashion," said I.

He nodded his head toward the car which stood outside the door, with its nose pointing in the direction of Galway.

"Give you a lift if you're going my road," he remarked laconically. "Pretty hot walking this morning."

"You're going the wrong way," I answered. "I'm for Dublin."

He cocked his eye at me again with a lot of surmise in the glance.

"Walking it?" he asked.

"Hope to," I replied. "It's what I intend, anyway."

He said nothing to that, but finished his drink, threw some money on the table, and lounged out. And I, finishing my lunch at the same time, followed him out into the blazing sunlight. He was looking at something in his car—and suddenly he turned on me like a flash.

"Look here," he said, "don't think me inquisitive, or—or anything of that sort, don't you know. You're English, and so am I—but, by gad, I like the looks of you!"

"If it comes to that, you're a good deal of a proper man yourself," I observed.

Then we both stared at each other and laughed.

"You're just the sort of chap I'm looking for," he said presently. "I wonder if——"

"Well?" I asked, after he had paused awhile. "You wonder if—what?"

"If you're disposed to a bit of an adventure," he said. "None of your half-boiled ones, but something with a spice of the real stuff in it."

There was something in his voice and in the sparkle of his eye that was peculiarly inviting—besides, I was already curious.

"Depends," I answered. "What is it? If it'll clear the way, I may tell you I'm free to do what I like. Here, I don't see why I shouldn't tell you how things are with me. I came over here to be master—teacher—usher—anything you like to call it—in a private school. I've been half-starved and the place was filthy—so I took my hook three hours ago. I'm walking to Dublin—not quite because I'm obliged to, for I'm not, but for pleasure and economy. That's my tale. What's yours?"

He was looking me over and through all the time I was speaking, and when I'd finished he clapped me on the shoulder.

"Nobody particular expecting you in England?" he asked.

"No one—particular—that could expect me," I answered. "I'm a good bit of a lone bird."

"Come a few yards along the road," said he. "I'll show you something."

I followed him away from the car along the road. That road ran along the top of cliffs overlooking Galway Bay. He led me to a point from which we looked

down on the bay itself—widespread, gleaming in the noontide sun. There were vessels there of all sorts and sizes, from great gray battleships to red-sailed fishing craft; he put out a big, hairy finger at one which lay in a little cove, all by itself, where the bay narrowed—a slim, elegant thing of graceful lines, whose spars looked like films of gossamer against the deep blue of the sea.

"See that steam yacht?" he asked laconically.

"I see her," said I.

"That's mine," he went on. "Like to have this adventure I spoke of—on her?"

"That," I replied, "depends on what it is."

He thrust his big thumbs into the pockets of his trousers, shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

"It'll take some telling," he said. "Look here! I'll make you an offer. Come back with me in the car—into Galway, where I've a house. I'll tell you the scheme there, over lunch. If you like to join in—good! If you don't, I'll set you on your way to Dublin in the car, as far as ever you like to go—right there, if you like. You'll lose no time by going back with me, anyhow. What say?"

There was sufficient mystery about all this to rouse my curiosity. I turned instantly to the car.

"I'll come with you," I said. "Never mind about time—a few hours'll make no great difference to me."

"That's the sort!" he exclaimed, as gleefully as a schoolboy. "Come on, then! I say, what's your name?"

"My name," I answered, "is John Bidwell."

He motioned me into the car, started the machinery, and jumped in at my side.

"Glad to know you, Bidwell," he said. "My name's Skatt—James Skatt, very much at your service. Now, then, the next thing's Galway."

2 *We Go Back One Hundred Years*

We pulled up in Galway before as queer-looking a house as ever I saw in my life. During my month at Deasy's I had rarely been in the old town, and I had certainly never seen this house before, which was no wonder, seeing that it lay hidden amidst a lot of ramshackle places near the harbour. It was a great, four-square place of gray stone, much worn and weather beaten, and it looked as if the folk who first built it had meant it to be a fortress as well as a dwelling place. There were no windows on the ground floor; the parapet of the roof was crenellated; there were unmistakable arrow slits in the walls, and all over the front were armorial bearings, chipped and time-stained. And the doorway and the door itself looked as if you could never get in through them, and would never get out again if you ever did get in.

Skatt left his car in the cobble-paved street and, taking me into an old stone hall, led me upstairs into a room which was just as queer as the house itself. It was a big room—big enough to hold a score of people round the great oak dining table in the middle. It was panelled in oak to a great height: above the panelling were portraits of men and women in ruffs, in farthingales, in armour—ancestors, no doubt, of somebody, perhaps of Skatt. All the furniture was oak—black with age. There was a massive sideboard, covered with silver that had not been cleaned for many a long year. The windows had not recently been cleaned, either, and there was dust everywhere. All the same, there were some signs of modernity—on a side table were English newspapers, reviews, magazines, and a heap of

new books and novels; in a corner were fishing rods of the latest fashion, with a couple of fine guns. And thrown on a chair was some sort of woman's work, with the needle left in it and a thimble dropped on its folds.

"Make yourself at home for a minute or two," said Skatt. "I'm going to see about lunch. We live in a sort of picnic fashion here, but we'll be all right. There's day-before-yesterday's *Mail*, and if you want a drink there's a variety of liquor on the sideboard. Help yourself."

He went away, leaving me alone, and being thus left I stared around me in considerable wonder. Everything had been queer that morning, but this was queerer than all the rest. Who was Skatt, and what was this place, and why——

I suddenly heard a woman's voice outside the room. She was singing, in a way in which one sings to oneself—half-hummingly. I caught one line, anyway, as the singer came close to the door, which Skatt had left ajar, and it was a line that somehow set my pulses leaping:

"Trading out of Galway into Spain."

Then the door was pushed wide and a girl came in, caught up at the sight of me, and stopped on the threshold, staring. As for me, I stared at her. Up to then—and certainly not since—I had never seen anything in the woman way that was comparable to what I then saw. She was as near as possible of my own height—and I top six feet—and her figure was the ideal of grace and vigour and alertness; as for the rest of her—well, I had a dim impression of hair that was neither brown, nor red, nor gold, but something of all three, of a pair of deep violet eyes, as big as a young fawn's, and of—but she found her tongue just then, and she smiled.

"Hallo!" she said, quite unconcernedly, "Jim bring you in?"

"Mr. Skatt brought me in," said I, with my politest bow. "He—he's gone somewhere."

"That's all right; he's gone foraging, of course," she remarked. "Sit down, if you want to. Have a drink. Have a cigarette. Jim is my brother. My name's Queenie—that's my real, proper name; it's not a nursery survival. Ah, I guess I know why Jim's landed you: he has a good eye for a likely man."

"Well?" I asked.

"Wants you to go with us," she replied, dropping into a chair and picking up the sewing. "That's it. Do go! Will you?"

"Where are we going?" I inquired. "What's it all about?"

But just then Skatt came bustling in, carrying a couple of bottles which looked as if they had just been dug out of the most cobwebby corner of a deep cellar.

"Oh, that's right, introduced yourselves, eh?" he said. "Bidwell, you can help me to lay a cloth—men always do these things better than women. Now, Queenie, what do you think of him?" he went on, pulling open a drawer and bundling out table linen, silver, and cutlery. "He's the sort, eh? Tell him he must come!"

Queenie gave me a look out of the violet eyes.

"He is coming," she said, daring me to contradict her.

"Did I say so?" said I, answering her challenge.

"You said 'Where are we going?'" retorted she. "That's good enough."

"Of course he'll come," exclaimed Skatt. He flung the cloth over the table, set knives, forks, spoons, glasses as deftly as if he were a steward, and finished his arrangements by placing a great tarnished silver cup in the

centre. "Come? Rather! Chance of a lifetime! And as to where we're going—but here's such provender as we can take up, Bidwell. You shall hear our plans while we're trying it."

There came into the room another queer specimen—a man who had the sea and its salt and its winds and its waves bitten deep into his face and stamped on every inch of his weatherbeaten figure: a middle-aged man in sailor's garb, who carried a great tray—silver (uncleaned) again—on which were set out the middle cut of a big salmon—cold, of course—on one dish, and a monster pie, that looked suspiciously like one of Fortnum & Mason's, on another. These things, with a loaf of bread, he placed on the hastily laid table, put a thing or two straight, and vanished.

"Come on, both of you," commanded Skatt. "Try a slice of cold salmon, Bidwell. Queenie caught it, and it was a thirty-pounder, give you my word!"

That was the queerest meal I ever sat down to. The brother and sister were queer; the surroundings were queer; everything was queer. But the salmon was prime, and so was the pie, and the two cobwebby bottles of Volnay. To me, who had been half-starved at Deasy's, that picnicky lunch was a heaven-sent feast. And all through it Skatt talked, telling me the tale—and the tale was queerer than all the rest.

"Look here!" he said, talking and eating and drinking all together. "You don't know us, beyond the fact that our name's Skatt. We're *the* Skatts. You've heard of Skatt's Patent Polish, of course?"

"Warranted to——" began Queenie.

"No advertising, now!" commanded Skatt. "That's done by the business. We don't assist in the active business, Bidwell; all we do is to collar the proceeds. Our

father was the original Skatt, who invented the polish; he left us half a million between us, and the yearly profits for ever. Understand? That's so that you may know who you're talking to, eh?"

"My father," I answered, "was a poor clergyman, who left me nothing. That's why you found me tramping it to Dublin with forty-five shillings in my pocket. Now you know who I am."

"And all the more reason why you should come with us and make a pot of money," he replied coolly. "Glad to put you in the way, you know. Now, what is the way? Going to tell you that straight off. You see, my father was once upon a time in Killarney, holidaying. There he met Miss McGroarty. Her father was Major General McGroarty, and his father had been a something of the sort before him. The McGroarty family has lived in this house ever since I don't know when. Those are their arms on the outside. Those are pictures of 'em. This is their silver—I'm going to have a professional fellow to clean it up. This is their furniture. This is their wine we're drinking—there's a cellar full of ripping stuff beneath us, in the family vaults. When I say these things are theirs, I mean they're ours. You see, we've quite recently come into possession of everything that was once the McGroarty property. Follow?"

"Exactly," I answered. "Your father married Miss McGroarty, whom he met at Killarney."

"Just so," said Skatt. "He did. Her father was against it, but when my father proved that he was a two-hundred-thousand-pound man, thanks to the polish, and likely to be still richer, the major general gave in with his native grace. Well, in time he died, and his son, Peter McGroarty, never married. Consequently, when Peter departed a few months ago he left all he had,

which was this ancient mansion, a bit of property, a sum in the funds, and all the family belongings, to his loving niece and nephew—that's Queenie and me. And so, a month ago, we sailed our yacht around here from Cowes, and came to see what we'd come into."

"And now you want to go off and come into something else?" I remarked. "What is it? Treasure?"

"You've hit it in one," said Queenie. "It is—treasure."

"On an island, no doubt?" I suggested.

"Wrong—it's on a mainland," she retorted. "And there'll be danger in the business, too—heaps of it!"

"Are you going?" I asked, bending over the table.

"Haven't I said so?" she flung back.

"Then I'm going, of course," I declared stoutly. "Consider it settled. And for the third or fourth time—where are we going, and what's it all about?"

"That's what I'm coming to," said Skatt. "Now, attention! I told you our great-grandfather was, like our grandfather, a big pot in the army. He was in command of one of Wellington's brigades during the Peninsular War. I don't know whether the old chap intended at some time to write a book about his experiences, but he certainly made a heap of memoranda, and wrote out a lot of papers, and put together a pile of documents written by other men—they're all there in that queer-looking old leather trunk, that one in the corner studded with brass nails, and I guess they were never looked at from the day of his death until Queenie tumbled them all out the other week. Now, then. Among those papers Queenie found a remarkable document. It's a memorandum written by a surgeon, who was evidently attached to the British troops under Sir John Moore at the time of the retreat from Astorga to Corunna, in 1809.

His name was Hamilton—Patrick Hamilton—and he may have been Irish, and he may have been Scotch. Anyway, this Surgeon Major Hamilton, for some reason or other, wrote out a document which he entrusted to my great-grandfather. We'll show it to you presently, but first I'll tell you what it amounts to, briefly. Hamilton says in this document that, being in Madrid in the winter of 1808, he made the acquaintance of a Spanish lady who was endeavouring to make her escape to England. She possessed a quantity of family jewels—diamonds, chiefly—which really represented all that she had left out of the wreck of things.

"She was afraid of carrying these, and she entrusted them to Hamilton, to be handed to the army treasurer and eventually taken to England, where they were to be put in a bank for her. Hamilton soon after this got mixed up in that retreat with Moore's troops, and just before Corunna he found himself and all the rest in a hot and tight corner. So he buried those jewels in the grounds of a Spanish villa in which he and some other officers were bivouacking, and he wrote an account of the affair and drew a sketch of the exact spot where he'd put the things, do you see? And this came into my great-grandfather's hands, and it's my belief, and it's Queenie's, that the old chap never even opened it; there are piles of sealed documents in that trunk that never have been opened."

"What about Hamilton himself?" I asked.

"Oh, Hamilton was killed in the Battle of Corunna," answered Skatt. "That's certain; I've looked it up. So the probability is that not a soul has ever known of what he did until Queenie unearthed his account. As for the Spanish lady who gave him the things—dead a hundred years ago."

"What about her descendants?" I suggested.

The brother and sister looked at each other.

"The odd thing," said Queenie, "is that Hamilton never once mentions the lady's name. You shall see the document. You'll see that he merely refers to a Spanish lady of high rank. And that's made Jim and me wonder if those jewels weren't possibly——"

"Loot," interrupted Skatt. "Loot. Maybe Master Hamilton collared them somewhere—there was a tidy lot of looting went on in the Peninsular War; didn't Wellington use to hang 'em right and left for it?—and invented all that tale about the Spanish lady to account for the things if they'd been found on him. How's that for a theory? Anyway, we're going to have a try for the stuff; it'll be a rare adventure. And you're coming, and you shall have your share. Look here, can you speak Spanish?"

"Not a word," said I.

"Then Queenie shall teach you," he continued. "She can; and if you know Latin, as you do, of course, you'll pick it up in a week. I can do a bit; I'll be fairly proficient by the time we're ready for business. Of course, we shall have to prospect a while when we reach the fateful spot, you know. We mustn't show ourselves too eager."

"Do you really know where the fateful spot is?" I asked almost incredulously.

"Queenie, get the papers," commanded Skatt. "Yes, we know where the spot is. It's in the gardens of the Hacienda Hermosa, on the outskirts of Corunna. Of course, until we strike the place we don't know if this Hacienda Hermosa is still in existence. It may have disappeared; the ground may be built over; there may have been an earthquake; all sorts of things may have hap-

pened. But, for the mere fun of the thing, we're triers. See here!"

He took the papers which his sister produced from the old trunk and spread them out on a corner of the table. They were two in number. One consisted of some twenty to thirty lines of particularly crabbed handwriting, the other of a rough map or chart; the ink was much faded on both, and seemed to have been of very poor quality to begin with. That, indeed, was the one fact that made me believe in the genuineness of the documents; it seemed to me that that was just the sort of ink a man situated as the long-dead Surgeon Major Patrick Hamilton was would get at the time.

"There you are," said Skatt, running his finger along the rough chart. "Grounds or gardens of the Hacienda Hermosa, you see. Little tower or turret in the angle of south wall. Treasure deposited five feet from corner of angle. According to the paper, it's in a small lead-lined box. If the Hacienda Hermosa is still the Hacienda Hermosa—and Spain's a slow-going old land, and things don't change much—why, then, all we've got to do is—to get into that garden!"

"That's Jim's optimism," remarked Queenie. "I expect to be shot, or locked up, or something. And, after all, it's a hundred years that those things have been there."

I struggled through the crabbed handwriting, took a careful look at the chart, and, lunch being over, rose to my feet.

"I have a portmanteau full of good clothes and linen up the hill," said I. "Lend me your car, Skatt, and I'll fetch it. And after that—when do we start?"

Brother and sister answered that inquiry simultaneously and in two words:

"At once!"

3 *Carmencita*

Late that evening, Skatt and the hard-bitten sailorman—whose name was Plint, and whose nationality was so doubtful that he himself had no clear idea as to what it was exactly—fastened up the ancient mansion of the McGroartys, and we all went away in the motor car to the yacht. There was nothing ancient, nor out of date, nor in want of polish about her. She was as smart a craft as ever you saw in Cowes Roads, or at a swell cosmopolitan gathering at Nice, and Skatt must have laid out a pretty penny on her. Her name, the *Polisha*, smacked of her derivation, and Skatt was boyishly proud of having invented it. I, of course, had never been in such luxurious quarters in my life, and I looked forward to our run to Corunna with no ordinary zest. As for that run, it took us unto the fifth day, and I spent all my time learning Spanish from Queenie, with whom, I may as well admit at once, I had fallen madly in love at first sight. This made the linguistic performances uncommonly pleasant, for, as the late-lamented Lord Byron aptly remarks:

'Tis pleasing to be schooled in a strange tongue
By female lips and eyes—that is, I mean,
When both the teacher and the taught are young,
As is the case at least where I have been.
They laugh so when one's right, and when one's wrong.
They laugh still more, and then there intervene
Pressure of hands—perhaps even a chaste kiss—
I learnt the little that I know by this.

Not that I am suggesting that Queenie made such oases of colour in our desert of drab philology at that period—not at all.

Nevertheless, she and I had our time pretty much to ourselves, Skatt spending his with his skipper, a Yankee from Cape Cod, who had been sailing plutocratic yachts all his life; and with Plint, whom, for reasons best known to himself, he had taken into his confidence about the treasure. He and Plint used to divine and concoct schemes about getting hold of the Spanish lady's diamonds—if they were still there—and at that stage Skatt kept them to himself. I don't think Queenie and I bothered much about the treasure during our outward jaunt across the corner of the Atlantic and the Bay of Biscay; we were otherwise happily engaged in making mutual confidences to each other. But when we were fairly within the Bay of Corunna—which is surely one of the sights of the world—Skatt called Queenie and me to conference.

"Look here, you two," he began when we were all three safely bestowed in his own private cabin, "we're on the very edge of our adventure. We've got to discuss ways and means. And don't you forget we've got to use a lot of discretion and finesse. Now, the first thing is to find out if that blessed Hacienda Hermosa stands where it did in Great-grandfather McGroarty's day. If it does, then the next thing is for us to take a squint at it—not too narrowly, of course. What say you two?"

"You can trust Plint?" I asked.

"Plint's all right," he answered. "Also, he's invaluable. I'm going to send him ashore to prospect as soon as we come to our anchorage; before nightfall Plint'll have acquired a mass of information. When we've got his report, then we can sail ahead some more."

That seemed a reasonable plan, and when we finally dropped anchor in the bay we three went ashore with Plint, who disappeared without a word as soon as we

touched a landing stage. As for us, we went exploring Corunna, old town and new, until the heat drove us into the patio of a modern hotel in the Calle Real, a fine street, which is literally paved with marble and so clean —when there is plenty of rain about—that the townsfolk say you can eat your *punchero* off it. There was a refreshing shade among the palm trees of that patio and a musical tinkle of water, falling from a fountain in its midst, and when we had got ourselves some delightful iced drinks and lighted cigars we were about as happy as they make 'em. After which—or, rather, immediately upon which—came the disturbing influence.

There walked—or, I should say, stalked—into that cool and shady patio a Spanish gentleman whom we all felt at once to be a great *hidalgo*, don, señor, or whatever his exact title might be; he was stately and distinguished enough to be a duke or at least a marquis. He made us all think of the old Spanish grandees that we had read of in history—he was so tall, so refined of face and figure, so melancholy, so mysterious, and his pointed gray beard and grizzled moustache were just things that you see on the canvases of the old Spanish painters. He only wanted putting into armour and furnishing with casque and lance and sword to look exactly like the great *caballeros* who fought at Grenada and Roncesvalles.

But, by all the saints in the Spanish calendars, attractive as this striking old gentleman was, his attraction was as nothing to that of a figure which followed him to a quiet corner under the waving palm branches. I had been hearing all my life of the beauty of Spanish women. Here at last was one in the flesh—real, warm, glowing, palpitating with life. Imagine—if you can!—a young Spanish woman of nineteen, tall, willowy, languor-

ous, voluptuous, with hair like night, eyes like stars, a complexion of June roses, and a mouth that was maddening even to see; imagine her Spanish grace of movement, the turn of her beautiful limbs, the glance of her liquid eyes, and you will have a very faint notion of what we three looked at that summer morning in Corunna. And on one of us, at any rate, the effect was more than electrical. For Skatt caught his breath and turned pale—literally pale—and Queenie bent forward warningly.

"Steady, Jim!" she whispered. "Look somewhere else—you'll be a gone coon in another minute if you don't!"

But it was too late. If ever a man fell in love at first sight James Skatt did. There was no mistaking it. He turned from pale to red, from red to pale again, his eyes became dilated, he caught his breath with an almost convulsive gasp. Whereupon Queenie deliberately kicked him under the marble-topped table.

"I said—steady, Jim!" she commanded. "Pull yourself up! Take a drink."

Skatt's hand mechanically sought his big glass; he lifted it and gulped his liquor. Then he looked at both of us—as a man looks at somebody who has just roused him out of a sound sleep.

"Moses!" he exclaimed in a tense, almost fierce whisper. "Did you ever see such a lovely creature in your lives?"

"Supposing we said we had—you'd only brain us," answered Queenie with calm unconcern. "Chuck it! The lady's well enough—in a florid, foreign way—but you may be sure she eats garlic. Be sensible, Jim! Look here, aren't we going to lunch in this hotel? Let's think of that."

But Skatt only growled. He recovered his senses sufficiently to abstain from staring, but all the same he contrived to take surreptitious peeps at the stately señor and the beautiful señorita. As for me, being a devotee elsewhere—which Queenie well knew by that time—I observed them as freely as I pleased, consistent with politeness. The old gentleman had ordered some sort of a drink for himself, and had lighted a long, thin cigar; he slowly perused a newspaper the waiter had handed to him; his adorable companion meanwhile trifled with an ice. And once, as she removed the spoon from her pearly teeth and ruby lips, she turned the full battery of her eyes on Jim Skatt for one soul-destroying second, and he started as if somebody had suddenly shot him. And at that Queenie leaned forward and spoke with authority.

"If you're going to make an exhibition of yourself, Jim," she said sternly, "we others are going to leave you. Turn your eyes away from beholding vanity——"

"Shut up!" growled Skatt with fraternal candour. "I'm all right. Leave me alone, can't you?"

"All wrong, you mean, my good brother," asserted Queenie. "Do, at any rate, remember that it's rude to stare. Don't let people think that we are insular-bred folk who have never been out of their own parish before. Besides, the señorita won't like it. Be good, Jim!"

My own impression was that the señorita liked it very much indeed; her great, dark eyes, glorious with life and fire, were continually roving in the great, handsome Englishman's direction. And whether it was that the grave-faced old don at her side suddenly became aware of her interest in the stranger, or whether he caught one of Skatt's admiring glances, I don't know, but he presently rose with an evident abruptness and annoy-

ance, and marshalling the vivid beauty before him, stalked out again into the sun-bathed street.

"Thank goodness!" sighed Queenie. "Now, perhaps, we shall have some peace. Don't be troubled, Jim—you're sure to see her again; this isn't London or Paris. Now do call that waiter and see if we can't have lunch here, under these palm trees."

The waiter was idling about in a corner, an Italian chap who spoke excellent English, and who had been keeping a sharp if quiet eye on our little comedy. Skatt beckoned him with an uplifted forefinger, and he shot to our side. But Skatt's thoughts were not of eating and drinking.

"Look here," said Skatt, slowly and meaningly, "do you know that very distinguished-looking gentleman who has just gone out? Some great man no doubt, eh?"

The waiter flourished his napkin and elevated his shoulders.

"I know him, sir," he answered. "I do not know if he is a great man. Don Esteban Pedro Ybanez—he lives along the street here, in an old house. He is a writer of books—a what you call in English an anti—ah, I do not quite know the word!—an anti—you know, he loves the old books and papers and bits of old pots, eh?"

"Antiquary," suggested Queenie.

"Precisely, madame—antikary," responded the waiter, joyfully adding another word to his vocabulary. "Yes—antikary. Much thought of in the town, sir," he continued, turning to Jim. "There is a book, a volume, he has written inside the hotel. Shall I get it, sir?"

"Presently," answered Skatt. "Er—the lady with him, eh? His wife, no doubt?"

The Italian showed his white teeth under his carefully cultivated moustache.

"*Per Bacco*, no, sir!" he replied. "The lady is his niece. The Señorita Carmencita, sir. All the same," he continued, dropping his voice and favouring us in general with a knowing smile, "he keeps, as it were, the eye of the husband upon her. Always in attendance—you understand, sir?"

"Jim," said Queenie with cold severity, "will you order that lunch? We're famishing."

We got our lunch in the end, and we ate and drank—Queenie and I with the healthy appetites stirred by five days and nights of sea air, but our guide and leader perfunctorily and languidly. For the first time since my meeting with him at the shebeen, Skatt was distrait and almost morose. At first Queenie rallied him; eventually she left him alone. After lunch he suddenly disappeared; Queenie and I lazed away an hour or two under the palms and watched people come and go from the hotel. At last Skatt came back, carrying an armful of books and pamphlets. He flung them on the table before us with a grin.

"Look here!" he said. "Those are the old chap's works. Voluminous, aren't they? History of the town. Account of the famous battle. 'Dissertation on the Ancient Stonework of Pesscaderia.' 'Inquiry into the Probability of a Phœnician Settlement in Galicia.' 'Essay on——'"

"What on earth is all that stuff for?" demanded Queenie, fingering the unmistakably foreign volumes and pamphlets. "You know very well you'll never read it."

"You will," asserted Skatt. "Do for you and Bidwell to improve your Spanish with. You've got to get all this up, Queenie, quick, so as to post me. Then, don't you see, I can call on old Solemnity, the Don Esteban

Pedro Ybanez, and tell him that, attracted by his fame as a historian, I have come all the way from England to kiss his hand and——"

"And make eyes at his niece," interrupted Queenie with some acidity. "Of course, Jim, there'll be nothing doing with you while this latest craze lasts. It's cooler now. Let's go back to the yacht."

Down at the landing stage we found Plint. He sat, placid and content, on a pile of timber, talking to a group of Gallegians. At sight of him Skatt started.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "Plint! I'd forgotten all about him!"

"And about what brought us to Corunna, too, I should think," remarked Queenie. "Henceforward we shall hear of little but the Señorita Carmencita until a fairer Dolores or a more seductive Juana presents herself. Anyhow, I think I should like to know what Plint has to tell us."

Plint told us what he had to tell as we were pulled back to the yacht. It was not a great, nor a long story, and its pertinence was in its conclusion. He had found the veritable Hacienda Hermosa. It was, as its name implied, a country house, a sort of villa, outside the town. It stood in grounds of some extent. The grounds were a wilderness, the hacienda itself a ramshackle ruin, in which nobody had lived for a generation. Nevertheless, it was not unwatched, for there was a sort of lodge at its gate in which dwelt a regular curmudgeon of a fellow, an ex-soldier, who appeared to keep an eagle eye on the property; there was accordingly small chance of digging for the treasure unobserved.

"Did you find out to whom the place belongs?" asked Skatt. "If it's as dilapidated as all that, one might buy it for a mere song."

Plint was the sort of chap who does everything thoroughly. Of course, he had found that out. The Hacienda Hermosa belonged to Don Esteban Pedro Ybanez, a gentleman who dwelt in a big house in the Calle Real.

Queenie uttered a queer little moan when she heard this. As for Skatt, he climbed up into the *Polisha* and dived down to his cabin with a face full of an almost unearthly determination.

4 *For Love or Treasure*

"That, of course, settles everything," declared Skatt, banging his collection of literature on the table and motioning us, his obedient followers, to seat ourselves. "The whole method of procedure is now as plain as a pikestaff. We spend to-night swotting at these books, until we're in a position to hold, at any rate, intelligent converse about 'em to their learned author. Then to-morrow we go in formal state to offer our respects to him. We tell him that his fame is great in England."

"Where I don't believe he's ever been heard of," interjected Queenie.

"And that we ourselves, being ardent fellow labourers in the fields of antiquarianism," continued Skatt, ignoring his sister's interruption, "feel that, being in the neighbourhood of so great a man, we cannot but venture to offer our tribute to him. That's the sort of thing, isn't it, Bidwell? Get at the old fossil on his weak side—what?"

Before I could give any opinion of this wicked duplicity Queenie came in again with a douche of cold common sense.

"That's all very well, my good brother," she remarked; "but you forget that we don't know anything

whatever about these things, and the old gentleman will find out that pretty quick. And then——"

But Skatt's mind was a fertile one. He had already anticipated things.

"Not he," said Skatt. "The probability is that he can't speak English, and as only you can speak Spanish fluently, we'll get on all right. And I do know a bit, anyway. Didn't I read up about the Irish raths? You can tell him that I'm the living authority on that subject. And perhaps Bidwell here knows a scrap or two about something or other. What do you know in that line, Bidwell?"

"I once wrote an essay on the 'Art of Castrametation—at school," I confessed. "What's castrametation? Why, it's all about how the Romans made their military camps."

"Good!" exclaimed Skatt. "Immense! Couldn't be better. Bidwell's the first English living authority on castrametation; he's writing a great book on it, which is going to be published in two volumes. Now, then, look here, Queenie, you've just got to skim through these things so that you can post us in the cream of 'em on the tips of our tongues, and——"

"Look here," said Queenie, "I want to know what all this is for. Is it to get hold of the treasure or to give you a chance of getting an introduction to the beautiful señorita? Come, now!"

But Skatt began to fumble among the books and pamphlets.

"You're always so beastly inquisitive!" he growled. "Ain't I a good brother to you, Queenie? Play up now—play up, and play the game!"

Queenie played up sufficiently to wade through the works of the learned Don Esteban that evening, and to

give us some idea of what they were all about. We were all—especially Skatt—fairly posted in our parts when, next morning, each arrayed for a formal call, we went ashore and proceeded to the Calle Real. And, while Queenie and I were only curious and amused, Skatt was as nervous as a débutante at her first ball.

His eyes went all over the shuttered windows of the old house; it was very plain that he hoped to catch a glimpse of even Señorita Carmencita's eyelashes. But we saw nothing of that sort; all we did see, after ringing a bell several times, was a sour-faced old manservant, who, having heard what Queenie had to say in her sweetest tones, replied acidly that his master did not receive at that hour, and was busy with his studies.

"Tell him that we've come all the way from Ireland, which is a place an awful long way off," commanded Skatt. "Tell him that we are dying to see so great a man. Tell him—but here, this is the best way."

He gave the old servitor an unmistakable wink, and pressed a coin into his not unwilling hand; and the old chap relaxed, and went away with our cards. A few minutes later he reappeared, and ushered us along a stone-walled corridor into the presence of Don Esteban.

Don Esteban, seen in the morning light, was not quite so impressive as we had considered him the day before. He was arrayed in an ancient flannel dressing gown, much stained with ink and snuff, his toilet had not been made, and he looked—what he was, of course—an old student set in the midst of a room full of dusty tomes, antiquities, parchments, and papers. And when he saw Jim Skatt he frowned visibly. For Skatt's glances at the señorita had been of a decidedly admiring and aggressive nature.

However, when Queenie, in her most dulcet voice and

with her most charming manner, had explained the object of our visit, Señor Esteban Pedro melted somewhat, and he condescended to shake hands and to cause us to be seated around him. He was not aware, he said, that his poor fame had spread; he was only a student of purely local antiquities, a mere dilettante. He listened with deep interest while Queenie told him that Skatt was learned on the subject of Irish raths, and I on the making of Roman camps, and he made each of us in turn a deep bow, to which we gravely responded. After which a bright idea seemed to strike him.

"It is unfortunate," he said, "that I do not speak English, and that these gentlemen do not speak Spanish. But, very fortunately, as they are learned men, we shall be able to meet on common ground. Tell them," he continued, eyeing us over, "that we will converse in Latin."

Queenie turned on us with warning eyes.

"The learned señor says," she said, "that he will talk to you in Latin. Buck up—if either of you know any."

That made me a bit sick, for talking Latin is a good deal different from reading even Virgil, and I was certainly not up to holding converse in it with a swell Latinist. But Jim Skatt was one of those persons who are ready for any and every emergency.

"Tell the señor," he said, "that in our country Latin has become almost an entirely dead language. Tell him that its use is now almost wholly confined to chemists, and to the chaps who stick labels on the plants at Kew, and on the animals at the Zoo. Tell him that we are so charmed with his own delightful language that we are learning it as fast as possible; meanwhile, it gives us the most exquisite pleasure to hear him speak it so beautifully to you."

Queenie may have put this into still more flowery language; anyway, the old don showed his teeth in a gratified grin, and bowed more politely than ever. And at that, Skatt, whose eyes had been perpetually watching the door, in the hope that the fair Carmencita might appear, waxed bold.

"Tell the señor," he commanded, "that we honour him so greatly that nothing on this earth could give us such pleasure as to receive him on our yacht. Put it hot and strong to him, Queenie—and ask his niece, of course, don't you know. Get him to promise to come to-morrow—to-day, if you like—any time—only fix it. Shove it in right thick—only get 'em—get 'em—and I'll buy you half a dozen hats from Paris!"

I don't know what Queenie said to Don Esteban, but she evidently mollified whatever previous prejudices he might have had—so much so, indeed, that he presently rose and ushered us into a beautiful, Old World garden at the rear of his house, where, half lying, half sitting, in a hammock slung among glossy-leaved orange trees, was the lovely Carmencita, more ravishing than ever in a morning toilette which displayed her perfect figure to the fullest advantage.

And here came in my first observation of the extraordinary tact of James Skatt—a tact almost amounting to hypocritical duplicity. For now, once in the señorita's presence, and having been duly introduced to her, and honoured by a touch of her shapely hand—accompanied by a glance from her glorious black eyes—he calmly assumed the rôle of a high-bred gentleman, and, having paid his formal compliments to the lady, proceeded to lay himself out to make up to her uncle. Finding that Don Esteban spoke some French and a very little English, Skatt collared him, and, walking up and down

the shaded garden, poured out on him the queerest mixture of languages I ever heard—French, Spanish, English, all mingled together anyhow. And somehow he contrived to ingratiate himself, and he kept solidly to Don Esteban, while Queenie talked ladylike conversation to the beauty, and I quietly watched both, making comparison between English and Spanish types of loveliness, and wondering if, anywhere else in the world, the likes of two such fine young women could possibly be found.

But next day, when Don Esteban Pedro Ybanez and the Señorita Carmencita came to visit the *Polisha*—which was *en fête* for their reception—Skatt transferred his polite attentions to the niece. It was only proper that he, as owner of the yacht, should show his lady guest over it, and there was so much to see, and such a lot to explain—in halting Spanish and execrable French on Jim's part—that the operation took a long time. Meanwhile, Queenie and I entertained the antiquary. Very fortunately, the *Polisha* contained a library of well-chosen books, among which was a good collection of illustrated topographical works. The old gentleman fastened on these at once, and kept us busily engaged in explaining things to him; consequently Skatt and Carmencita were left to carry on their conversations uninterrupted, and I fancy that by the time she and her uncle departed a pretty good understanding had arisen. Skatt, anyhow, was calm as an inland sea when he and Queenie and I were at last left alone.

"I hope you're satisfied, Jim," observed Queenie. "You ought to be."

"I'm all right," answered Skatt imperturbably. "Why not?"

"I don't know why not," retorted Queenie. "And I

don't know, either, how long you're going to hang around here—you do, I suppose. What about this treasure hunt?"

"Going to talk to Plint about it, just now," replied Skatt. "You've got to be awfully diplomatic about these things."

I don't know—I never did know—what Skatt fixed up with Plint, but I do know that Plint, during the next few days, was frequently ashore at strange hours, and that Skatt himself began to make mysterious disappearances. And Queenie began to make equally mysterious hints.

"Jim," she said, "is up to something. I know him. He's playing some game of his own. Of course, the fair señorita is in it. That's certain. Do you know, I know Jim so well that I shouldn't wonder if he's mixing up the treasure business with his latest love craze. What is sure is that some scheme's in hatching between him and Plint. And Plint's as deep-dyed a conspirator as ever breathed!"

But we never knew what these schemes might be until one night, about a fortnight after our arrival, Skatt, who had been absent all the afternoon and evening on one of his mysterious disappearances, burst in upon Queenie and me—busied in improving our language and (incidentally) our acquaintance.

"Now then, you two!" he burst out. "Everything's settled! Queenie, I've had to trade the secret off on the don. There was no other way—couldn't get into that Hacienda Hermosa and get hold of it, either, in any other fashion. The don is literally wild with excitement. We're going to start operations in the morning—the whole boiling lot of us. You must both be up very early,

so's we can work while it's cool. Plint'll rouse us soon after daybreak. Better go to bye-bye, Queenie."

"Is the señorita going to assist?" asked Queenie.

But Skatt had vanished into his own cabin, and for some time I heard him singing in singularly gleeful if unmelodious fashion. Queenie heard him, too, and she gave me a look which was as meaning as it was eloquent.

"There is much more in this than appears on the surface," she observed darkly. "I feel a presentiment that quite a lot of queer things are going to happen tomorrow."

As regards that, Queenie was much more of a prophetess than she knew.

5 *The Treasure Haul*

There was no need for the stealthy-footed Plint to rouse us next morning. Skatt himself had us out of our quarters long before the sun topped the rest of the Cantabrian Mountains. He seemed to be unusually energetic and bustling; one might have said that he was nervous—a strange and extraordinary thing for him. He scarcely gave us time to swallow our coffee and bolt our rolls; the night gloom was still overhanging the waters of the bay when he bundled Queenie and myself into a boat and bade his men pull for a certain landing stage at the end of the old part of Corunna.

"Where's Plint?" suddenly asked Queenie. "Won't he be wanted?"

"Plint went ashore half an hour ago," replied Skatt. "He's gone ahead—to get things ready."

There was no more said on that point—nor on any other. Queenie was half asleep, and began to yawn con-

tinually; I, too, felt as if I had been cheated out of something which I wanted very badly. We sat alternately blinking and yawning, until the boat touched an old ruinous pier, beyond which stood a typical Galician conveyance, a regular dilapidated old shandrydan, drawn by a pair of knock-kneed horses which were in charge of a boy who, like ourselves, looked half asleep. Into this equipage Skatt hurried both of us, himself following with certain impedimenta in the shape of provisions—we might have a long job of it, he said, and there was no chance of finding refreshment near the scene of our labours.

"And where, pray, is the scene of our labours?" demanded Queenie, with yet another yawn.

"Up there," answered Skatt, pointing to the ridge of a hill which the crazy equipage had already begun to climb.

"Right up among the chestnut and cork trees. Lovely spot!"

A period of silence followed; my own lassitude turned to patient grumpiness; Queenie closed her eyes and dozed, leaning back against the cushions of the ancient carriage; as for Skatt, he smoked cigarettes at a most furious rate, lighting, puffing, and throwing them away in rapid succession. And suddenly, just as we were reaching the top of a winding road, he plunged his hand into an inner pocket with a hasty and violent exclamation.

"Hang it!" he almost shouted. "I've forgotten the papers!"

"What papers?" demanded Queenie, opening a slumberous eye.

"Papers telling us exactly where the confounded stuff is planted," growled Skatt. "You know, the plans and

particulars. I had 'em all ready in another pocket last night—only I forgot all about it, and didn't put on that coat this morning. Confound it all! Now I'll have to go back and fetch 'em. Look here, we're nearly at the spot—the Hacienda Hermosa is only round that corner, behind the big grove of chestnuts there, on top of the hill. You two get out and stroll along; you'll find the old don there, or he will soon be there. Just explain to him, and say I'll be back as quick as ever I can. Can't dig without the plan."

He had stopped the carriage by that time, and had taken out of it the two baskets of provisions and wines; he set these down by the roadside, pulled his sister out, motioned me to follow her, and had made the driver turn his team round before we quite comprehended this new development. In another minute the knock-kneed crocks were careering wildly down the road which they had just climbed, and Queenie and I stood staring at each other. But, attractive as Queenie was—even when she was half asleep—my eyes wandered from her to the baskets.

"I suppose your brother means me to carry these things," I remarked lugubriously.

"Do nothing of the sort," said Queenie. "Leave them there until the carriage comes back."

But I already saw the first quivering shaft of rising sunlight through the trees, and I took a basket in each hand.

"No," said I. "The sun'll be on this spot in ten minutes, and we don't want the wine to get heated. Come on, let's get to the crest of the hill."

We were well repaid for that little climb. We came out on a ridge, from the summit of which we set eyes on a view that was positively enchanting. Far away, across a

valley that lay half hidden in the gray morning mists rose the long, serrated line of the Cantabrian Mountains; over one rugged spur the sun, a burning mass of golden light, had just risen, and his radiance was transforming everything at our feet. We stood spellbound as we watched the crests of old towers, gaunt and gray, appear through the mists in the valley, and saw the gleams of fresh light steal on groves of glossy-leaved trees and stretches of shining water. The beauty of the scene woke us both; also it somehow induced us to take each other by the hand—out of sheer sympathy, I suppose—and I was just beginning to realize how very warm and supple Queenie's hand was, when we heard a rattling of wheels, and woke out of this early morning dream to see another rattletrap conveyance approaching from a different direction; and in it, stately and meagre enough to resemble Don Quixote himself, yet evidently eager and enthusiastic as a schoolboy, was the worthy owner of the Hacienda Hermosa. But—he was alone.

Perhaps neither Queenie nor I attached any great importance to that obvious fact—it is difficult to realize things at sunrise, especially when you are feeling sentimental. Personally, I wished that Don Esteban Pedro Ybanez had postponed his arrival for another ten minutes or so; but, as he was there, we had to make the best of him. I don't believe Queenie was any more pleased to see him than I was, but, womanlike, she concealed her feelings, and proceeded to welcome him with great cordiality. After which she explained the situation, which Don Esteban grasped at once. He had brought with him a supply of digging instruments—spades, picks, shovels—and he made his driver carry them into the grounds of the hacienda, whereto we followed him. And I contrived to observe to Queenie that if only Don

Esteban and his driver and his caretaker had been out of the way, and if Skatt had not been coming back, and if we hadn't been going to dig for treasure, we might have turned those grounds into a new paradise for the time being. For in that first morning sunlight the place was a dream—a tangle of semi-tropical trees and luxurious vegetation and glowing flowers; just the spot, if I am to speak plainly, in which to make love.

But Don Esteban had no thought of love in his old head; he was crazy about that treasure. He plied Queenie with questions about the discovery of the McGroarty documents until he had extracted every scrap of information she could give him; he fumed and fretted at Skatt's delay; finally, he had us up into a sort of watch tower, from the parapet of which we could see all down the hillside road to the town and harbour. The road lay white and winding beneath us, but we looked in vain for the knock-kneed horses and the ancient contraption which they pulled. An hour passed —two hours passed—and there was no sign of James Skatt. Queenie and I, being young and of a healthy appetite, paid some whole-hearted attention to the provision baskets; as for Don Esteban, he wrapped himself in his toga-like cloak, declined all sustenance, and gazed fixedly at the point wherefrom Skatt ought to appear.

But no Skatt came. In his stead came Plint—imperturbable and stolid as ever. He came in the ancient conveyance, left it at the gate, and approached us. And to Queenie he held out an oblong envelope, which she and I knew to contain the McGroarty documents.

"The master's compliments and apologies to the Spanish gentleman, miss," announced Plint. "And will you tell him that Mr. Skatt has received important news which makes it absolutely necessary for him to

leave Corunna at once? You're to give the plans to the don, miss, and tell him to make what use he pleases of them, and you and Mr. Bidwell are to come back to the yacht with me—steam's up and she's all ready for leaving."

I don't think our friend Don Esteban Pedro Ybanez felt any regret whatever at hearing this news. He expressed himself in courteous and polite terms, as befitted a Spanish gentleman, but his eyes gleamed with suspicious zest when Queenie presented him with the papers, and it struck me that he was secretly overjoyed to have the chance of doing all the scoring off his own bat. He promised to let us know the result of his excavations, voiced in courtly terms, the regret of himself and his niece at our sudden departure, accompanied us to the carriage, and swept his big sombrero to the ground as he hastened away. After which, no doubt, he fairly ran to seize spade and pick.

"What's all this about, Plint?" demanded Queenie, when the knock-kneed steeds were careering down hill at eminent peril to us and themselves. "What does it all mean?"

"Can't say, miss," replied Plint, from his perch beside the driver. "That was all the message there was, miss."

"But how did my brother get news?" persisted Queenie. "Was it a cablegram or what?"

Plint could say nothing further. He was one of those men who look as if they carry deep secrets in every nook of their dark minds, and are never going to tell them, and neither entreaty nor blandishment could get anything out of him. He hurried us down to the shore, and got us off to the yacht; even as we touched her decks the *Polisha* began to move, with her nose turned to the

broad Atlantic. And Queenie darted away to find her brother, but Plint tapped me respectfully on the elbow and motioned me aside.

"Mr. Bidwell," he said, in a sort of stage whisper. "It ain't no good looking for the master, sir; he ain't on board. The fact is, sir, he got married this morning. The young Spanish lady, of course. Married at the English consul's they were, sir, at six o'clock, when all the rest of you were safe at the top of the hill. And they're off, sir—off by motor to the Portuguese frontier. We're to sail the yacht round to Oporto, and join 'em there by to-morrow night. And Mr. Skatt's love to you and his sister, sir, and will you kindly break the news to her?"

I retired to break the news to Queenie. I broke it in my own fashion. It developed into quite a pleasant process. And at the end of half an hour Queenie and I, hand in hand, were discussing business matters in a calm and deliberate way.

"Of course," said Queenie, "if Jim can do as he likes, I can do as I like. If he does things on the sudden, why shouldn't I do things on the sudden? I dare say there is an English consul at Oporto as well as at Corunna. And in that case——"

"Queenie," said I, checking her in the orthodox fashion. "You are deliberately proposing marriage to me. So be it—I accept your offer. But, I say, don't you think we'd better call on the bride and bridegroom of this morning first? You see, after all, Skatt is your brother, and he may have a word to say."

But Queenie shook her head.

"I know where all Jim's words will be said just now," she remarked sagely. "You wait till we catch 'em."

We caught them late the next evening. They were in

the flower-laden balcony of a romantically situated hotel, where Skatt, of course, had taken an entire suite of rooms for them and us. The newly made Mrs. Skatt, more beautiful than ever, was lounging in a hammock and smoking cigarettes. Skatt, with a red rose stuck in his ear, adored her from the depths of a neighbouring chair. He had a guitar, and he was strumming it while he chanted loverlike strains to her. One verse came to Queenie and me as we stole in on them:

"Trading out of Galway into Spain!
'Twas there I had the 'venture of my life!
I'd the choice 'twixt gold and pearls
And the pick of Spanish girls,
And I traded back to Galway with a wife!"

II

THE SLANT-EYED CHINAMAN

I

How it came about that on that particular October morning I was stranded on the Clarence Pier at Portsmouth with, literally, a few pence in my pocket is immaterial to the present purpose; the more pertinent fact is that there I was, in that miserable predicament, with none to turn to for immediate help, and utterly blank of mind as to what was next to be done. I had paid out two of my last coppers to obtain entrance to that pier—there was a vague notion that I might pick up some porterage job there which would bring in a shilling. With a shilling I could send a telegram to the only man I knew who would be likely to wire me money—he was the last resource; for I had already pawned my watch and my overcoat, and, hourly expecting a remittance which up to then had not arrived, had not had the sense to make the application by letter which I was now feverishly anxious to make by telegraph. There might be someone coming off a boat at that pier who would give a shilling to have a bag carried—I would undertake the job with fervour. But at the end of an hour I was still unemployed, and was thinking of trying the railway stations; then, very suddenly, the man came on the scene who plunged me headlong into action and adventure.

He was coming away from the window of the ticket office where you book for Ryde and Cowes and Southampton, this man, and he carried a ticket in his hand and was clearly unconscious that it was there. A big, heavily built fellow in a dark-blue serge suit, topped by a rather sporting sort of overcoat, he looked to me like a well-to-do publican, or perhaps a bookmaker; there was that air about him. But just then, whatever he was, his great idea was certainly to do something or get somewhere in a tremendous hurry; his eyes, as he came out on the open pier, were all over the place at once, taking in the misty coastline on the opposite side of the water, looking up the water itself as if in search of the Ryde boat, which even then was churning its way toward us, and then glancing first over one shoulder and next over the other, as if he either expected or feared somebody. In his haste, or his nervousness, he raised his fat, stub-ended fingers to his chin, and in so doing discovered that he was holding a ticket; I will swear that until that instant he had forgotten that he had just taken it. But now he hastened to thrust it into his waistcoat pocket, and in so doing he encountered something else that he had evidently forgotten. His fingers came out of the pocket grasping a scrap of paper twisted up into what they call a cocked hat. And here I made certain that the man was in a state of terrible preoccupation, for after staring blankly at this discovery, he made a sign of vexation and looked round him in a fashion which said as plainly as possible that he had omitted to do something which ought to be done at once. But my wits had been sharpened by privation during the last two days, and without more ado I stepped up to him.

"Can I take that somewhere for you, sir?" I said, pointing to the bit of paper which he was twisting round

and round in his fingers. "I think you want it delivered to somebody."

He started—more nervously than one would have expected in such a big, fleshy frame—and gave me a sharp, suspicious, and yet, I fancied, highly relieved glance.

"Eh, what?" he exclaimed, running me over from top to toe. "You—wanting a job?" I knew what he meant. Outwardly I was eminently respectable; good clothes, good footwear; I was even spotless in linen. But the boat was at hand, and I did not hesitate.

"I'd be glad of the chance of earning a few shillings," I answered hurriedly. "Stranded—unexpectedly—you understand. I'll carry your note for you—and you can trust me." He had evidently made up his mind to do that, for without another word he plunged a hand—there were two or three big be-diamonded rings on its pudgy fingers—into his trousers pocket and pulled it out again full of gold. And picking out a sovereign with no more concern than if it had been a shilling, he thrust it into my hand with the bit of folded paper.

"Look you here, my lad," he said confidentially. "There's a name on that paper—Holliment. That's the chap it's for—Holliment. You get into those streets between High Street and the Hard—you know? Ask for Holliment—general dealer—anybody'll tell you. And give him that. Go now—and there's a quid all to yourself. My boat!—you'll go straight off?"

"This instant!" said I. "He'll have it in a few minutes. Greatly obliged to you!"

"Bless you!" he answered, with a queer sort of grin. "Ditto!"

He made for the boat, and without a backward glance I hurried off that pier, lighter of heart than I had been for forty-eight hours. A sovereign!—for ten minutes'

walk. I went away toward High Street feeling as if the Bank of England had suddenly become my sole property. Turning a corner, and chancing to look seaward, I saw the smoke of the steamer rolling away in the sharp breeze—my man was there, scudding gaily across the water. Whither? And why in such a hurry? In so much of a hurry, indeed, that he had forgotten to send the scrap of paper which was now in my pocket—a missive that was evidently of so much importance that he was glad to have it carried at any cost. Sharpened in perception as I was by hunger (for I had had no breakfast, and had gone very short the day before), I knew that the man was intensely relieved to get rid of that note and parted with his sovereign right willingly.

I began to get curious about this twisted, crumpled scrap of paper. Who was Holliment? What was this highly important message? What did the whole thing mean? Before I came to High Street my inquisitiveness got the better of me; I pulled out the cocked hat and turned it over two or three times. I saw then that it was a piece of paper hurriedly torn out of a cheap account book—poor quality paper, the first stuff that had lain ready to hand. And I felt no great compunction, things being as they were, in unwrapping it and looking at whatever might be written inside—there was already a spice of mystery about this adventure, and wherever there is mystery there is danger; I wanted to know what I was in for, in some degree.

Standing for a second in the open street, I read all that was written. Two words, heavily underscored:

CLEAN AWAY

There was nothing else. No name; nothing. I was as wise as ever. So, folding the torn leaf into its original

lines, I slipped it into my pocket again, and, crossing the High Street, plunged into the slums which lie between it and the Hard.

2

There are some queer places in Portsmouth, and it seemed to me that Holliment, whoever he was, lived in one of the queerest. It was quite evident, however, that he was known pretty well, and after various turnings to right and turnings to left I saw his name in dirty white letters on a black sign which formed one of the chief landmarks in a peculiarly squalid street. The sign was displayed above the windows of a low-roofed, one-storied place, half shop, half shed; this was flanked by a much higher, tower-like erection which I took to be an old sail loft; the name was on that, too, in smaller letters on a smaller signboard. In the wall of the lower building was a double door, wide open to the street, and when I walked inside it I saw at once that Holliment's business of general dealer was a wide and various one, for I never set eyes on such a collection of ancient stuff as that which he had gathered about him; the place was a scrap heap, a dumping ground of all sorts of rubbish, from once gaily coloured figureheads to rusty nails. The only thing that looked at all modern was a freshly printed placard hung on the window of a sort of office; it announced that orders for coal were taken there, and gave a list of current prices. But just then there was no one in this office, nor in the gloom of the shed-like, much-cumbered place, and I had waited and rapped for some minutes before a man came out of the shadows and approached me—a short, fattish, furtive-eyed man, in his shirt sleeves, who obviously wondered what I was after. I pulled out the note.

"Mr. Holliment?" I asked.

"That's me, sir," replied the man.

"A gentleman whom I met on the Clarence Pier, who was in a hurry to catch the boat, asked me to give this to you," I continued. "I came straight to you with it; he seemed anxious that you should have it at once."

I placed the note in his very dirty hands and stood by watching him narrowly as he somewhat clumsily opened it. I should say that he was ordinarily a man who could keep a compressed countenance, concealing his feelings very well, but on this occasion he was obviously taken too sharply to hide anything. His puffy face turned the colour of a dead thing—it made me think for the instant of those calves' heads that lie on the butchers' stalls—and when a shade of life came back to it, it was a gray, dull shade. His hands shook suddenly, and he only half checked an exclamation. And at that I affected to see nothing, turning away. But suddenly I felt that he was regarding me.

"Do you know him who gave you this?" he asked quickly.

"Not at all," said I. "Stranger to me—and I to him. The fact is, I was looking for a job, and I saw he wanted that taken somewhere, so I offered to take it."

"He give you anything?" he inquired, looking me over, pretty much as the other man had done.

"If you want to know," I answered, "he did! He gave me a sovereign."

No surprise came into his face. Instead, he suddenly made a movement toward his coat, which hung on a nail close by. He began shuffling into it.

"Look here!" he said. "I've got to go out—business! Over that!" He pointed to the scrap of paper, which he had crumpled up and flung away on the floor. "Some

hours I've got to be out—can't help it. You say you were looking for a job? Stop here and give an eye to things till I come back—to-night, it'll be. I'll give you another quid—and there's nothing to do."

"What is there to do?" I asked. "Can I do it?"

"There's nothing to do—but stick here," he responded quickly, "keeping an eye on things. If anybody comes for any of this old stuff, let 'em have what they want and take their names and what they've got. If anybody orders coal, write it down in that book. I'll be back about six to seven, and you shall have your money."

I hesitated a bare second—after all, the extra sovereign was worth a few hours of that sort of thing.

"All right," I said. "I'll stop till you come back. But there's one thing."

"Well?" said he, edging away toward the door in his obvious impatience. "What?"

"Dinner!" said I. "I shall want it."

"That's all right," he replied. "A man brings mine at one, sharp—take that. You'll find it'll do you. Well, then, till this evening."

"I'll see to things," I assured him.

He made for the door without another word—but before he went through it and into the street he looked cautiously round the door posts, up and down; there was that in his action which assured me that he was keenly anxious. Then he shot off, and I, too, looked out, to see whither he went. It was not raining, but he slunk rapidly along the side of the wall, close to it, as if rain had been coming down cats and dogs, and with his head bent, his slouch hat pulled over his eyes, and his whole attitude that of a man who is running away. Suddenly he shot into one of those narrow alleys of which there

are so many thereabouts, and so I saw him no longer. But I had seen enough to convince me that, if the sender of the mysterious message was in a state of high nervousness, its recipient was in a state of something very like fright, and I wondered why. What had happened that morning in the affairs of these two men to make both hasten off somewhere in desperately hurried fashion? Something, evidently—but all the speculation in the world would not tell me what. Meanwhile there I was, in charge of an ancient rubbish store, the afternoon to get over, and another sovereign to anticipate. That, anyway, odd as the adventure seemed, was preferable to hanging about Portsmouth wondering what I was to do when my first sovereign was spent.

It was now past noon, and between then and one o'clock nothing whatever happened. I sat down in the little office and read the newspaper. No customers came; nobody came. But at precisely one o'clock in walked an individual who was obviously the potman of some adjacent hostelry. He carried a tray, whereon, beneath cloth, were sundry dishes covered with tin plates, a half loaf of crusty bread, and a jug of foaming ale. A good smell came from his tray, and I silently blessed it and him. He stared at me in surprise, and I hastened to relieve his anxieties.

"Mr. Holliment's away for this afternoon," I said. "He's left me in charge, and I'm to have his dinner."

"That's all right," he answered, and set his tray on a neighbouring table, "and a good un it is, and here's wishing you a proper appetite."

"Same to you," I responded politely.

He grinned understandingly and went off, and I had the cloth and the tin cover whipped away before the sound of his big feet had died out on the pavement.

Clearly, I thought, Mr. Holliment had a very comfortable notion of a homely dinner! There was roast loin of pork, with apple sauce, potatoes, and greens; there was plum pie and custard; there was a mighty wedge of good cheese. And there was the ale—a whole jug of prime stuff, with a head on it.

I felt like a new man when I had made an end of Holliment's dinner. After all, the adventure was turning out well for me. I had not fared so sumptuously for many a day, and I had a sovereign in my pocket and another in prospect. I should be able to sleep in a decent lodging that night, and next day to journey onward to London by rail instead of tramping the highway. Everything, in fact, looked quite rosy just then, and, finding a box of very decent cigars on the office desk, I lighted one and prepared to face the business requirements of the afternoon with complacency and patience.

3

By the time I had finished that cigar I was beginning to think that for all practical purposes Holliment might just as well have locked up his place of business as have left me or anyone else in charge of it. It was then past two o'clock, and not a soul had crossed the threshold since Holliment stepped over it—always saving the welcome potman. I was beginning to get bored. And in order to amuse myself I took a cast round the place, examining it and its contents. The low, shed-like erection and its piles of old iron, coils of ropes, heaps of rubbish I took in at a glance; there was nothing much there to interest me. But the taller building at the side had more of interest. It turned out to be a high, gloom-filled place, not unlike the interior of a church tower,

and just about as badly lighted. Whatever purpose it had served I could not make out; its floor was littered with more rubbish, or what seemed so to me, and its walls were thick with dust and great festoons of cobwebs. Around them, beginning in one corner and going in flights and landings across and around the others, was a narrow, rickety stair, which wound far away into the thick gloom at the extreme top. Why any stair should be there at all I could not make out; there were no doorways in the three or four landings, and no signs that there had once been floorings between the pavement on which I stood and the unceilinged roof so high above me. But when, after some time, my sight had grown accustomed to the gloom, I made out that right away at the head of the stair, just beneath the head of the rough wall and the beginning of the tiles, there was a door, or at any rate an opening—a black, cavernous-looking place. And I was wondering what lay behind it, and whence it might lead, when I heard somebody come into the shop, and, after beating on the floor, call loudly for its proprietor.

This was the first customer I had seen—a man who wanted some old iron and had a small cart outside whereon to carry it away. He helped himself to what he wanted when I had explained matters to him, and remarking that his name was Toller, and that Mr. Holliment knew him well enough, carried out his stuff, and went away with it. This broke the ice—other folk began to drop in. They all seemed to know their way about, and were all ready to mention their names; what puzzled me about them was whatever they meant to do with the things they picked out and took away. Nobody seemed at all surprised to find Holliment out; nobody paid any particular attention to me as his represen-

tative. I came to the conclusion that this was a queer sort of business. But during the afternoon I did some trade in coal; one man came in and ordered a truckload; another wanted four tons; before the dusk came on I had written down memoranda concerning coal delivery which represented a considerable amount of money. So the time passed, and at half-past four in walked the friendly potman, armed with yet another tray. A capacious pot of tea this time, piping hot, flanked by another tin dish, wherein was a mountain of buttered toast. Once more I was convinced that Holliment knew how to make himself comfortable.

The potman carried away the dinner things; he informed me, while he put them together, that he came from the Admiral Hawke, round the corner, and asked if I was going to be where I was when to-morrow came, because, if so, there was going to be roast goose on tap, and he would see that I had a good helping. I told him that, as far as I was aware, Mr. Holliment would shortly be back and my temporary engagement over. But, I added, if I was still in Portsmouth at noon next day, I would take care to visit the Admiral Hawke and dine there, if that was possible. He answered that it was quite possible: there was a half-crown ordinary there at one o'clock, whereat they did people far better than at any of the hotels where the nobs went. He went off then with his jingling tray and tins, and I drank tea and ate hot buttered toast in great contentment. And just after that it began to grow first dusk and then dark, and through the open double door of the shop I saw lights begin to shine out across the street, and through a vista between the opposite houses, where there was a glimpse of the harbour and of the Gosport shore in the distance, I caught the gleam of other lights, red and green and

yellow, that came out on the spars of passing ships. Why, I do not exactly know, but the sight of those lights somehow made me begin to wish that Holliment would return, give me the reward of my vigil, and let me go about my business.

There was a lamp on the rough desk in the bit of an office, and as soon as I had finished the tea and toast I lighted it—the darkness was getting a bit too marked. The draught from the door on the street caused the lamp to smoke. I went over to shut it. Just then a lad came along shouting the five o'clock edition of the newspaper; I bought a copy and went back to the office, and as I had no tobacco of my own I helped myself to another of Holliment's cigars, and sat down in a rickety elbow chair to read and smoke. Perhaps ten or fifteen minutes went by in this fashion—and then, chancing to look over the top of the newspaper, and in the direction of the dirty window panes which gave on the street I saw, close-pressed against the glass, the flat nose and slant eyes of a yellow-cheeked Chinaman.

The unholy and discomforting vision faded out of sight as suddenly as it had come into it—so suddenly, indeed, that for the instant I wondered if the whole thing was not hallucination. But on the next I was out of that office and at the door of the shop, staring at the place where the Chinaman ought to have been. He was not there; there was no one there—the street at that point was empty. I did not see even the whisk of a garment disappearing round the corner of the narrow alley into which Holliment had slunk a few hours before. All I saw was the lights, feeble and obscure, along the squalid street, and the passing of other lights, green and red, across a bit of dark water.

I went back to the office and the friendliness of its

lamp, conscious that my heart was beating at a faster rate than it should have done. I was frightened. It would have been odd if I had not been frightened—startled, at any rate. What was that parchment-faced Chink after? Why did he peep in there, through a corner of the window, instead of entering the shop? The mere sensation of being overlooked was unpleasant enough, but there had been that in the dark, slanting eyes which made me certain that their owner was spying. Why? Whom did he want? Holliment, of course. I wished heartily that Holliment would come. To be left there, in that gloomy hole of a place, with evil-faced Easterns looking in upon one, was what I had not bargained for. And, careless about possible customers, I presently went back to the street door and, after examining its fastenings, drew a big bolt into place. Holliment could knock when he came; until then, I was determined that no foot should cross the dirty threshold.

There was a blind above the window through which the Chinaman had looked, and when I went back to the office I took hold of its cord to draw it down. The whole thing came away in my hand, rotten with age and disuse. But I was going to have no more faces at the window, and, finding some tacks and a hammer, I got up on Holliment's desk and nailed the blind to the casement, shutting out the darkness and the spits of light in the opposite houses. That done, I attempted to read the paper again. I had not read many lines when I heard a sound—gentle, but palpable—outside the door which I had just barred. At that, I stole across the floor and listened. All was still at first, but at last I heard movements outside—soft, cat's-foot movements. And then the handle of the door was turned, quietly, slowly; I saw the brass knob within moving. But whoever it

was that had his hand on the outer knob soon realized that the place was now secured against him, and presently I heard the stealthy footsteps move off. The Chinaman again, without a doubt.

I was by that time fully disposed to go away, leaving this sort of thing to go on without me; I had had enough of it. But I did not like to go before handing the place over to its owner; also, I saw no way of locking the street door from the outside—if there was a key, Holliment evidently had it in his pocket. It would scarcely do to leave the place unprotected; moreover, I particularly wanted my sovereign. And, after all, the man had said that he would be back that evening, and it was already well past six o'clock. I sat down again, and again tried to read. That was poor work; the minutes dragged. But, at last, I heard seven striking from the neighbouring clocks, and almost immediately afterward I heard something else—a sound of slow, stealthy movement in the tower-like building at the side of the shop. Even as I caught it, it ceased. A minute or two went by. I heard it again—again it ceased. That there were rats in that place, I had no doubt, but something in that muffled sound made me certain that it came from a human being.

Rather than sit there listening and wondering, I picked up the lamp and went into the place. The lamp was about as effective as a single match lighted in a cavern; it showed a small area at my feet and kept the rest of the high space above me in darkness. Of course, I heard and saw nothing. But I was absolutely certain that there was something or somebody there. And when I went back to the office I had made up my mind, if Holliment had not come back when the town clocks next struck, I was going. The events of the last two or three

days—the anxiety consequent upon being stranded, the uncertainty of my prospects—these things had not improved the state of my nerves, and I felt that if I stopped much longer in that place, imagining Chinamen prowling around, I should become a good deal more of a wreck than I wanted to be. It was not worth the sovereign which I should probably lose by going away. Nevertheless, going I was unless Holliment turned up suddenly.

I heard no more of the movements in the big building, and the time went on slowly until the first stroke of eight broke the prevalent silence. I got out of my chair at that, flung away the newspaper, and seized a pencil and a scrap of paper; I was going to leave a note on the desk telling Holliment that I could not remain longer. I was utterly indifferent by that time as to whether he found the note that night or next morning; indifferent, too, to my sovereign. I wanted to get out and breathe free air. But before I had scribbled two lines I heard a low, sibilant signal, and jumping round as if I had been shot, saw the man I was writing to standing in the gloom of the shop, six yards away, outside the office door, beckoning. How he had got there without my being aware of his entrance I did not stop to think, but I was unfeignedly glad to see him, and stepped almost joyfully in his direction. He put up his hand, unmistakably in warning.

"Pull that blind down in there!" he whispered. "Right down—so that no one can see in!"

"It is down," I answered. "Been down since six o'clock."

"Well, turn that lamp down, too," he went on. "And bar that door on the street—quick."

"That's been barred since six o'clock, too," I said,

laying a finger on the regulator of the lamp. "It's safe enough."

He waited until the light had gone down to a pale gleam, just enough to let us see each other's face, and then, keeping himself in the shadow, he came across the floor and into a corner of the office, giving me a narrow, searching glance.

"Anybody been?" he asked significantly.

I pointed to the memorandum which I had prepared and laid on the desk.

"All down there," I answered. "That's the business part of it."

There was a purposeful significance in my reply, and he was quick to see it.

"And—what else?" he said anxiously. "Anything—not business?"

"I don't know whether it's business or not, Mr. Holliment," I replied, "but after it got dark, and before I'd fastened up that blind, I chanced to look at the window there, and I saw, his ugly face pressed close against it, a Chinaman."

I was watching him. For the second time that day I saw his face go pasty white—only, as far as I could make out in that dim light, this time it was whiter than before—and he caught his breath in something like a sob.

"A—a Chinaman!" he whispered. "You're—certain?"

"Never more certain of anything," I retorted. "Dead certain!"

"Well?" he asked, with an obvious effort.

"After that—when I'd drawn this blind and bolted the outer door—I heard stealthy footsteps outside, and saw someone try the handle," I continued. "Since then

—some time ago—I heard queer sounds in that tower place of yours, and I went in—and saw nothing. Queer doings, Mr. Holliment!"

He had his hands in front of him, clasped across his chest, and I noticed that his fingers were working one within the other. If my nerves had been touched a bit, his were undoubtedly ragged.

"Yes," he assented, with a nod. "You—you won't understand——"

"Don't understand anything, and don't want to, Mr. Holliment," I interrupted. "But I'd be obliged if you'd give me the sovereign you promised me and let me go. I want to be off."

He pulled out money from his pocket at once, and to my surprise gave me a couple of sovereigns, pushing them at me along the desk with a gesture which clearly meant that I was heartily welcome to them.

"Yes," he said, half abstractedly, "yes, of course you'll be wanting to go. But—not through that door on to the street! It would be as much as your life—anybody's life—is worth to go out of that door to-night."

4

I was glad afterward that he said that. It pulled me together; steadied my nerves. Instead of being confronted by vague doubts and surmises, I now knew that there was something really dangerous in front, and my hand was steady enough as I picked up and pocketed the two sovereigns.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm much obliged. You'll find all particulars there of what's been done. But—the rest of it, Mr. Holliment? What's it all about?"

All this time I could see that his ears were on the alert. The man was listening, and for all he was worth; and when he spoke again it was in still lower tones.

"I said—you wouldn't understand," he answered. "But I'll tell you this much. That note you brought me this morning—you'd got it from a pal of mine; a big, good-looking fellow? To be sure!—and it was a warning. Him and me—we're in danger. There's that broke loose here in Portsmouth that wants to get its own back—you understand."

"The Chinaman!" I suggested.

"Well, he's part of it, though I didn't exactly expect to hear that he'd got to work," he replied. "Part of it!—there's more than him in it. Clear out?—that's the thing while this lot is anywhere about. My pal—the man you saw—he'll have put himself away in a quiet spot across the water, and so shall I, when we're out of this. Mind you! I've been off all the time since you came in—yes, but I haven't been a hundred yards away! Lying doggo—safe spot—up the street. And—we must get out, now!"

"How did you get in?" I asked.

"Same way we'll get out," he answered. "Not through that street door, you may bet! I don't want a knife thrust between my ribs. Look here—turn up that lamp! Leave it burning. There's not much oil in it, and it'll burn itself out. If we leave it burning they'll think we're—at least that I'm—still here. And now, you follow me."

He slipped out into the shadows of the shop again, motioning me to follow him across to the tower-like place at the side. Within that, he paused, gripping my arm. There was some light there from a street lamp outside; enough, at any rate, to show us the staircase which

I had looked at during the afternoon. He pointed to it, and to the darkness high above its final landing.

"Way out there—up that stair—through door at top—and into the next house, which is empty," he whispered. "But the stair—not safe for two! Rotten!—but it'll bear one at a time; I came down it, just now. I'll go first—when I get to the top I'll whistle—then you come up. Bear well to the wall—keep your weight that side, see? All safe, then."

"I don't want to break my neck, Mr. Holliment," I remarked. "Is there no other way—no back entrance?"

"Aye, with a knife the other side of it!" he said. "Come on—it's safe enough. I'm twice your weight!"

Suddenly he let go of my arm and I made out that he twisted his hand round to his hip: the next instant I heard a click of something metallic.

"What's that?" I demanded.

"Revolver!" he whispered, "not that I think it'll be wanted, but—well, here goes! Keep off that stair till I whistle."

He slipped from my side and vanished into the shadows; a second later I heard him cautiously stealing up the staircase. The sounds that he made, slight as they were, reminded me of what I had heard in that place earlier in the evening. He must have been light-footed, however, for they were very slight sounds indeed, and when he reached the first landing they died away altogether—doubtless the dust lay thick as a carpet up there. Once, as he crossed another landing, I caught a glimpse of him—a beam of light fell across the wall just there from the gas lamp outside. He was stealing forward, close to the wall, as he had bade me do, and there was now but another flight of the stairs, for him to

scale before reaching the dark doorway just beneath the first round of the unceilinged roof; I began to nerve myself to follow him. And then, just as I groped for and laid a hand on the worm-eaten balusters at the foot of the stair, and edged away from them toward the wall. . .

What then happened did happen, and was over in less time than one could gabble any words which would describe it; the suddenness of it showed me with what truly remarkable rapidity a thing can happen. I heard a creaking movement like the opening of that mysterious door high up in the wall; a sudden exclamation, as of startled anger, from Holliment; the crack of his revolver as he discharged it once, twice; a deep groan; the plunging forward of some heavy body; its collision with another; a sharp cry, rising almost to a shriek of despair—and on that the whole upper part of the rotten staircase gave way with a sickening splitting and rending, and came pell-mell, a mass of wood and iron and masonry, into the basement where I stood shrinking and trembling against the wall. And there was another long-drawn groan, ending in a sigh, and then silence—and in the silence I felt clouds of acrid, dry, pungent dust slowly enveloping me, and at that pulled myself together and made for the shop and the street door. Whatever might be in front, I knew that death was there behind, amid that mass of ruin.

I slid back the bar, tore open the door, and darted out—straight into the arms of a figure that seemed to spring out of nothing. Those arms tried to get a hold on me, and in that fraction of time I knew that it was the Chinaman with whom I was at grips—there was no mistaking the smell of him. But, in struggling, a ray of the lamp close by fell on my face, and on the instant my assailant not only released me with an extraordinary

celerity, but vanished as quickly as he had appeared. And at that I shook myself out of the crumpled condition into which his sinewy arms had mauled me, and darted forward again—this time to run into a policeman.

I went back to that place of Holliment's as leader of a regular posse of men—the policeman, his sergeant, a couple of bluejackets, whom we pressed into service at one corner, a stray marine, whom we encountered at another. I babbled most of my story into the ears of the police before we entered the shop. How much they comprehended of it I cannot say; it seemed to me that they were considerably mystified, and hardly knew what to expect. But, as for myself, I knew what I expected to find in there—Holliment would be one of them. But—the other?

The bottom of the tower-like building at the side of the shop was a mass of wreckage; half the old staircase and its landings had broken clear away from the wall, and lay shattered and twisted among the other rubbish on the floor. But by that time the acrid clouds of dust had cleared, and by the light of the lamp which I snatched up from the office desk and the lanterns of the policemen we were able to look for what we knew must be there. Holliment came first, crushed up among the wreckage in an attitude which suggested a fractured spine and broken neck. And still—the other? We had to do some digging and lifting and general clearing out before we got at him, but in the end the two bluejackets—very handy indeed at this job—suddenly drew aside and motioned me to cast the light on a dead man's face. The next instant I found myself staring blankly at the man whom I had met on the pier. There was a tiny blue spot right in the middle of his white, smooth forehead. . . . "I reckon you're the only person that can tell all

about it," the police sergeant was saying, close behind me. "You're in the know, evidently."

If I silently nodded to him in response, it was not because I fully acquiesced in his assertion. I knew just how much I knew. And I also knew that at that moment slinking softly through the Portsmouth slum streets, there was a slant-eyed Chinaman who knew a great deal more—that would never be told to anybody.

III

COPPO CALLS ON THE DUCHESS

I

Coppo (whose real name, according to the police records, was Albert Edward Fisher) was having an unusually successful time. The upper rooms of the big country house which he had quietly entered by way of a side staircase that led from an obscure corner of the gardens were just then untenanted. Coppo had made a wise choice as regards time; this was the dinner hour, eight o'clock. The guests of the great man into whose preserves Coppo had penetrated without invitation were gathered about the brilliantly lighted table in the vaulted dining hall; ladies' maids and gentlemen's valets were downstairs at supper; Coppo had a whole range of apartments to himself. And he was the sort of man who knows how to make the most of opportunities, and to work swiftly when opportunity presents itself.

Already, within ten minutes of his entrance, he had gone through four of the vacant rooms, picking up likely articles—a watch here, a diamond pin there; in one room he had actually found a little heap of notes lying on the dressing table; the pile of notes had swiftly vanished into Coppo's pockets. And now in the fifth room, one of a more palatial sort than the others, he was staring, for the fraction of a second, at a really big

thing—a necklace of pearls, which lay in its open velvet case on the dressing table reflecting soft lights in the glow of Coppo's electric torch. But only for that fraction; in another, the necklace was slipping into a special corner inside Coppo's waistcoat.

It was a great haul, that! Coppo had learned a good deal about precious stones of all sorts in his time, and he knew real pearls when he saw them. For an instant he stood wondering whether he wouldn't clear straight out, satisfied with what he had got. Easy as the job had been up to then, there was always the danger of the sudden advent of chamber maid, lady's maid, valet. And the door of the staircase by which he had entered was right opposite the door of that particular room. Best go! But, as his action acquiesced with his thoughts, there was a soft rustle behind him, followed instantly by the sharp click of a switch and a flood of light, and Coppo, with a nasty tightening of his throat, turned to confront a tall, strongly built young woman who, by this time, had one hand on the button of a bell and with the other was covering him, point-blank, with a businesslike, ugly-looking revolver.

For a mere second Coppo and his captor stood motionless staring at each other. And Coppo's heart sank within him; it felt like a piece of lead going swiftly to the bottom of a deep, black well. For he knew this woman; knew her by sight, that is, and well enough, too. In those peaceful intervals of life in which Coppo was not professionally engaged he frequented race courses, and was well acquainted with the great folk of the fraternity—by sight. He knew owners, trainers, jockeys, bookmakers—nobody better. And he had seen this determined-looking young woman many a time, at Epsom and Ascot, at Doncaster and Newmarket.

She was a well-known owner of some very pretty horseflesh; not, up to then, a particularly lucky one, but sure to come off sooner or later—Coppo himself had backed her horses more than once. And young as she was, she was a widow, a dowager—but among racing folk the qualifying term was dropped; Coppo knew her as the Duchess of Hathington. It seemed an age to Coppo before the duchess spoke. In reality, it was not the tenth of a second, for she spoke at once. And her voice was as hard as the nasty bit of metal in her steady fingers.

"Put your hands up!"

Coppo obeyed—mechanically. He put up his hands. But the duchess did not change the position of her hands. Coppo saw that she could do two things simultaneously, if she so desired. She could press the button of the electric bell with her left hand; she could send a bullet through him with her right. And that right hand of hers was—well, as stiff as a rock. He couldn't see a tremor in it, nor in the shapely wrist and arm. What he did see was the barrel of that beastly revolver pointed in a dead straight line for his chest. There was no use in thinking about a rush—she'd drill a hole in his lungs or his heart if he as much as moved; he could see that. Coppo kept quiet and felt unutterably sad.

"I'll let the light through you if you disobey orders!" said the duchess in flintlike, staccato tones that made her prisoner feel chilly. "Now! Bring that right hand down. Pull my necklace out. Throw it on the bed. Quick!"

Coppo obeyed, conscious that the black mouth of the revolver confronted him. He sighed as the necklace, tossed unceremoniously on the counterpane close by, coruscated in its passage.

"Put that hand up again!" commanded his captor. "Now then, how did you get in here? No lies!"

"Side staircase—from the garden," muttered Coppo. "Door right opposite this."

"Anybody helping you?" demanded the duchess. "Any confederates inside the house? Any—outside? On your own? Then keep your hands up till you get to that door, and remember I'm covering you. Now open it with your left! March across that corridor. Now that door——"

She was close behind him as Coppo opened the staircase door, and she suddenly gave him a vigorous shove that sent him flying downward clutching at its narrow walls. The next instant he heard the door closed and locked; the next he was out in the blackness of the night, running away, and for some reason or other, vague to himself, his knees knocked and his teeth chattered.

2

It was not until Coppo had reached the friendly lights of London and had dropped into his favourite corner in his usual house of call, half an hour before closing time, that he really recovered his equanimity. A whisky and soda cleared his brain, somewhat, and helped him to begin thinking; a second one, before he left for his lodgings, helped him still more. Coppo had had a shock.

Several times, in a somewhat roundabout way from the country house, thirty miles off in Buckinghamshire, he had pinched himself, wondering if all this was a nightmare. But once left alone in his third-class smoking compartment between one local station and another, he had convinced his moithered wits that he was not dreaming, for he had in his pockets a gold watch, worth

at least eighty guineas, a diamond pin, possibly worth a couple of hundred, fifteen pound notes, and twenty-five pounds in five-pound notes. No dream then—but why had the duchess let him go?

In the course of an Ishmaelitish career, Coppo had been caught red-handed twice. Nobody had shown any inclination to let him go on those occasions—on the contrary, the folk who had rudely laid hands on him had shown uncommon solicitude to keep company with him until he was safely locked up.

On reflection, it seemed to him that neither of those episodes had produced the nerve-shaking effect of this last adventure. Coppo knew as well as anybody that if you go in for playing a game you must take its ups and downs like a true sport, and if the duchess had pressed that electric bell and kept him covered with her revolver until the flunkeys came upstairs and threw their ugly hands on him, he would have taken it in the right spirit—to use a cricket simile, it would only have been like getting out unexpectedly to a bumping ball, just as you were well set. But this—this was like being bowled neck and crop . . . and told to resume your innings! It wasn't cricket—and what had the duchess done it for?

"Some game!" mused Coppo, as he wandered forth into the night, and made for his lodgings. "Some blooming queer game of her own. But what? Had me a fair treat, she had. And—showed me the door. Not overpolitely, to be sure—come near breaking my neck down those stairs, I did—but still, the door. And—liberty! Liberty—when I was making dead certain it 'ud be ten years—at least! Blowed if I can make it out!"

Nor had Coppo made it out when he had turned off the gas and got into his bed. The wonder of it all seethed

in his brain, preventing sleep. The more he thought and remembered, the more he was puzzled.

"Came in from a side door, she did," he muttered to his pillow. "Wasn't dressed up for dinner—sort of what they call a neglijay costume she was wearing. That must ha' been a sort of sitting room she come out of. Heard me, of course! Blinking door must ha' been open—on the jar, what? And why didn't she ask me if that necklace was all I'd got? Might ha' cleared out the whole floor for all she knew. But no! Nothing but the necklace. To chuck on the blooming bed. And then—the boot. And what I says is what I've said before—what's the game?"

Then Coppo comforted himself with two reflections. First, it was quite evident that the duchess had no intention of handing him over to the bloodhounds of the law. She could have dropped him into their jaws in one mouthful if she'd liked; she hadn't liked. Second, he had made a very nice little haul out of his evening's excursion; what he had carried away with him would realize a good deal, and he would get rid of it quite comfortably next day, even of the notes.

He slept at last, and when he woke he thought rather kindly of the duchess. Her conduct was strange and therefore suspicious, highly suspicious, but there, reflected Coppo as he ate his eggs and bacon and read the racing news, if it hadn't been for her distinctly quixotic behaviour, he, Albert Edward Fisher, *alias* one or two other appellations, would have been in a police cell, waiting appearance before a magistrate—instead of which there he was, in his slippers, in front of a comfortable fire.

Coppo got out of the slippers after a while and into his boots, and in due course he went out and did a highly

successful day's work in disposing of the gold watch, the diamond pin, and the notes.

When, at the end of the afternoon, he had finished his labours, he felt that he had earned the right to treat himself to a little dinner and a bottle of the best, and he spent ten minutes—over a cocktail—in debating the rival charms of various restaurants. Half an hour later, having made his choice, he seated himself in a quiet corner of Romano's, and when he had given careful instructions to an attentive waiter—who, from Coppo's get-up, took him for a prosperous young bookmaker—leaned back in his seat and opened the evening newspaper which he had just bought in the Strand. His eyes bulged and his mouth opened before he had turned a page. That was because of what he read . . . and what Coppo read, he read twice, and thrice, and then again:

A daring and successful burglary took place last evening at Selmorton Park, the country residence of Sir Archibald Selmorton, in Buckinghamshire, where Sir Archibald and Lady Selmorton are at present entertaining a small house party. The burglar appears to have gained access to the upper part of the residence while the guests were at dinner and the servants downstairs, but it is probable that he took fright or was disturbed during his operations, as his nefarious doings were confined to five out of some twenty bedrooms. From one of these he secured a gold watch, from another a scarf-pin set in diamonds; from another a sum of money in notes. The most serious loss, however, is that of the Dowager Duchess of Hathington, from whose dressing table he secured a very fine pearl necklace, valued at many thousands of pounds. Curiously enough, the dowager duchess, through indisposition, had not joined the other guests at dinner, and was in a sitting room adjoining the bedroom at the time the necklace was stolen. Her Grace heard nothing of the burglar,

who got clean away with the necklace and the articles above-mentioned. There is no clue to his identity, and up to a late hour this afternoon the police had not made any substantial progress toward his capture.

When Coppo had read this paragraph for more times than he could count, he laid the newspaper aside, plunged his hands into his trousers pockets, dropped his chin on to his blue-and-white cravat, and stared fixedly at the shining silver and glittering glass of his cover. It was a long time before he muttered to himself.

"So I've got the blinking necklace, have I?" he said. "And it's worth a good many thousand pounds, is it? And there is no clue to my identity, isn't there? Well, that's a blessing, s'help me! And what I've got to say to all and sundry—meaning my blooming self—is, what *is* her little game?"

Then the waiter came with the soup.

3

As a rule, Coppo never thought about anything when he ate and drank—sufficient unto the occasion was the pleasure thereof. But he thought a lot while he sat at table that evening and still more over the cigar with which he wound up his entertainment. In all his experience of life he had never known such a puzzle as this. Being of a systematic and orderly turn of mind, he put things in what he called black and white to his intellectual powers.

"Like this here," mused Coppo. "There I am, all on my lonesome, as far as I'm aware, on that blooming first floor—not a soul about, apparently. I does four rooms—picks up a bit in these, leaving the fourth blank. Goes

into a fifth—sees and mops up a bit of pretty. Then she comes—and makes me chuck it on the blinking bed! And then—spite o' the nasty thing she's got in her hand, spite o' the way she had me at every turn, it's—go! And lends a kind hand by pitching me halfway downstairs!"

After a little more puffing at his cigar and a sip or two of coffee, Coppo continued his ruminations.

"But that ain't half!" he went on. "This here piece in the paper—if that ain't a bit of what you may call sheer amazement, may I never! I've got the blinking necklace—me! I carried it off—me! I departed with several thousand pounds' worth o' property—me! Well, what I say is— where is it? Where? Now what the never mind does it all mean, and what game is that she-devil playing? For it is a game. And what right has she to besmirch a poor fellow like what she's besmirched me? That's insult added to injury. Makes me throw the blasted goods on the counterpane, and then tells them blinking reporters—and the police—as how I cleared out with it. That's a lady—a duchess! May I never!"

But at that a spasm of comfort shot through Coppo's wine-warmed bosom—two spasms of comfort, in fact. There was no clue to his identity. And he could keep an eye on the Dowager Duchess of Hathington. He could . . . and he would.

Many people took an interest in the duchess, but during the next few months nobody took as much as Coppo did. He became a sedulous reader of the society columns in the newspapers, so that he might keep himself informed of her whereabouts. Now and then he saw her. Once, at a race meeting, he came face to face with her. Coppo was wearing a new overcoat of an uncommon sort; it attracted the duchess's attention. For one mo-

ment she stared straight—and amusedly—into its owner's face. Coppo was half-minded to lift his rakish hat; it was only by a severe effort of will that he enabled himself to refrain. But he did trifle with a shy smile, and the duchess cut him dead.

"Never mind," said Coppo. "I can ride a waiting race as well as anybody. And we ain't through with this yet. Sooner or later yours truly will be hearing something."

Nearly a year had gone by before Coppo heard anything. What he then heard came from his usual source of information, the evening newspaper. Turning that over one night, he saw the duchess's name and began to read with undiminished appetite. The duchess was still the most interesting figure in Coppo's little world. And as he read his eyes bulged more than ever, and his mouth grew round, and his hair felt inclined to bristle, and he began to think that he, Albert Edward Fisher, was a mere neophyte in his line of business compared to the duchess in hers.

Mr. Justice Starke's court will doubtless be a centre of fashionable attraction to-morrow [said the newspaper, in a paragraph obviously written by a lady member of its staff], for then begins the already much-talked-of case of the Dowager Duchess of Hathington *v.* All and Everything Assurance Company.

The duchess, as is well known, is the fortunate possessor of some of the finest pearls in the world; she had quite a large collection when she was Miss Peppie de Earlie, of the Hilarion Theatre and she added largely to it after her marriage to the Duke of Hathington, whose unfortunate death in the hunting field left Her Grace a widow at a very early age. The duchess, who is famous among her friends for her keen business instincts, some time ago effected an insurance policy as regards

her jewels with the company above referred to, the said policy covering such little accidents as loss, burglary, larceny, and the like.

Now about this time last year, Her Grace was one of several guests at Sir Archibald Selmorton's delightful place in Buckinghamshire, and of course she had with her some of the Hathington pearls—the famous necklace, at any rate, which is said to be worth at least sixteen thousand pounds. Enter a wicked burglar one evening, at dinner time—and this necklace vanishes. Now the duchess wants her money from the insurance company and this company won't pay. Why the company won't pay, we shall doubtless hear within the next two or three days. Nothing has ever been heard of the burglar since his highly successful coup, and needless to say, nobody has heard anything of the precious pearls, either.

Coppo drew a long breath when he had finished this bit of literary matter. Then he whistled.

"So that was her little game, was it?" he murmured.

"Bilking the insurance company! What ho! Thought she was safe, what? Thought I couldn't give information for fear of incriminating myself, eh? Just so! All right, but yours truly has a headpiece on him that mayn't be as well stuffed with brains as some, but ain't stuffed with feathers, all the same. Coppo, me lad, you've got to do a bit of thinking! And you play light with the booze to-night, 'cause you got to keep a clear head for the law courts to-morrow morning!"

4

Coppo, in his most inconspicuous suit of clothes, got a front place in the queue which lined up early for Mr. Justice Starke's court next day. But he took good care, once admitted to the gallery, not to take a front place in

it. He sat well back, in the darkest corner he could get, but where he could command a full, uninterrupted view of the witness box. As the lady scribe of the newspaper had predicted, there was a crowded attendance of fashionables; the court was packed when Mr. Justice Starke took his seat, and he had quite a bevy of notables —chiefly ladies—on either side of him on the bench. There were some of the most famous people of the day there, but Coppo, who had a bit of a penchant for celebrities, paid no attention to them. One person in that court interested him more than all the rest lumped together—the duchess. He wanted to see how she would carry it off—how she would comport herself in the witness box.

"Cheek!" mused Coppo, as he watched her come into court and take a seat next a man who was evidently her solicitor. "Blooming cheek. Looks as if—as if——" Words failed him there. He knew the truth—he, Albert Edward Fisher. It was in his power to get up, force his way to the front, and make such a revelation as would astonish everybody. But he waited. Let the duchess have her innings.

If Coppo and those about him expected fireworks, they were disappointed. Nothing more prosaic than the duchess's examination-in-chief could be imagined. She gave evidence as to taking out this insurance policy—it had been in force for some years, and she had been careful to pay the premiums promptly. She told a straight story about the circumstances of the theft at Selmorton. She had intended to go down to dinner that night, though she was not feeling very well. Her maid had laid out her things, and she herself had got out the pearl necklace and laid it, the case open, on her dressing table. But then her indisposition had increased, and

eventually she had decided not to dine, had sent her maid away, and had retired to her sitting room which opened out of the bedroom. She was in there for perhaps an hour alone. When she next went into the bedroom, the necklace had disappeared.

It was a plain tale, very plain, and when the duchess came under cross-examination nothing shook it. But the opposing counsel wasted very little time in asking questions about the alleged actual theft. He swept by that part of the business, and suddenly plumped her with a question which sent a quiver through the court.

"Now I want to ask a question of a rather unpleasant nature. Is it not a fact that for some little time—for at any rate twelve months—Your Grace has had considerable financial difficulties, that you have, to put it plainly, been rather put to it for money?"

Coppo nearly let out a sharp whistle. He stopped it just in time. Then he bent forward, his eyes fixed on the witness. The witness seemed ill pleased.

"I—well, I have had some difficulties," she admitted.

"Have you not had serious losses on the turf?"

"I have had losses."

"Do you not bet a great deal, and play bridge, too?"

"I do bet. And I do play bridge."

The counsel looked down at his notes. The silence all round him deepened. But at that moment, the hands of the clock pointed to the hour of four, and Mr. Justice Starke, without ceremony, gathered his robes about him and vanished behind the curtains.

And Coppo vanished, too. He slipped quietly into the gathering dusk and made for his favourite tavern. There, over a drink, he muttered a few words to himself.

"Bluff is the ticket!" said Coppo. "Just that—bluff! And plenty of it."

5

The Dowager Duchess of Hathington lived in a smallish house in one of the side streets off Park Lane, and there, on the evening of this first day of her case against the insurance people, she dined alone. Already she was dreading her reappearance in the witness box next morning. The duchess did not want to be turned inside out. There were possible questions which she had no mind to be asked. She had lost a lot—an awful lot—of money on the turf that year, and the year before, too; she had had serious losses at bridge, and it was pretty well known she had gambled heavily at Deauville and had lost there.

The duchess was alone with these uncomfortable reflections when her parlour maid entered and presented her mistress with a card. It was not a nice card. To begin with, it was printed. To end with, it was dirty. But the duchess extended a hand gingerly, to touch it.

"Mr. Albert Edward Fisher?" she said. "I don't know him! Who is he, Parkins?"

"Respectable young man, Your Grace," replied Parkins. "He said he wanted to see Your Grace on legal business."

"Oh," remarked the duchess. "Just so! One of my solicitor's clerks, no doubt. Take him into the study, Parkins."

The study was a dismal apartment, but it had a cheery fire and a bright lamp in it, and when she presently walked in, their glow fell full on Coppo, who stood in a respectful attitude with his back to the further wall. The duchess knew him at once, and she let out a half-smothered exclamation at sight of him. But she was

sufficiently mistress of herself to shut the door behind her.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

Coppo made a polite bow. He spoke at once—but in tones that suggested all sorts of things—the need of secrecy, mystery, danger, warning.

"Lady," he answered, not feeling quite certain about the correct fashion of addressing duchesses, "you ought to be extremely thankful 'cause I am here! Lady—you're like to be in a hole to-morrow morning."

The duchess gave Coppo a long and steady look. She got it back—accompanied by a nod. Coppo added a word or two to the nod.

"Things is being found out, lady!" he said quietly. "And no error."

"Sit down," commanded the duchess. She pointed imperiously to a chair and Coppo took it, perching on the edge with his bowler hat on his knees. "Now, then," she continued, seating herself opposite, "what does this mean?" Coppo looked at the duchess and shook his head sadly.

"Ah!" he replied. "That there is a stiff 'un, lady! I wish I knew! But wheels within wheels—eh, lady? Of course, this here insurance company is at the back of it!"

"What do you know about the insurance company?" demanded the duchess.

Coppo smoothed the outer circle of his hat affectionately. After he had regarded that awhile he looked again at the duchess, and his smile was as bland as a Chinaman's.

"Think you're a-trying the bilking game on 'em, lady," he answered. "Suspicious, they are."

The duchess's eyebrows contracted, and her eyes

fastened on Coppo as if they wanted to pierce his brain. But Coppo's countenance grew more and more ingenuous.

"Notion is—this notion—that you never did have that there—you know what, lady!—a-taken from you," he continued. "That there wasn't no loss of it—which of course, as I know, there wasn't."

"They've been getting at you?" asked the duchess. "Or—you've been to them?"

But Coppo smiled and continued to stroke his hat.

"No! No!" he said, cooingly. "No, lady—not precisely that, neither. There is ways, you see——"

"Look here, my man!" interrupted the duchess suddenly, "do you realize that I could ring that bell and give you in charge? What proof have you that you didn't carry off my property? What's your word against mine?"

Coppo laughed—outright. He laid down the hat and from somewhere inside his jacket produced a pocket book, from which he drew out a newspaper cutting.

"Bit out o' the paper here, lady," he said. "I'll read it. 'The Dowager Duchess . . . had not joined the other guests at dinner, and was in a sitting room adjoining the bedroom at the time the necklace was stolen. Her Grace heard nothing of the burglar.' How's that, lady!"

The duchess made no reply. She was beginning to be frightened. This man knew more than he had told, so far. And Coppo was quick to understand. He laughed, and carefully restored the scrap of paper to his pocket book.

"You couldn't do nothing, lady," he said, confidently. "You never saw me, nor heard me, that evening—according to the statement you made to the police at the time. You can't go back on that, lady!"

"What have you come here for?" asked the duchess.

"Friendliness, lady, friendliness," answered Coppo. "To warn you! You ain't no idea, lady, of what's going to happen to-morrow! I have! I was in court all to-day—had to be! And heard—much—after the old judge took his hook off the bench. To-morrow, lady, you're to be turned inside out—by that long-nosed chap what had just started a-asking you nasty questions. Lady—it can't have but one end—the insurance company'll win. And then, criminal proceedings against you, lady! Fraud!"

"Who sent you here?" demanded the duchess. "There's somebody behind you!"

Coppo rubbed his chin—thoughtfully.

"The police, lady, is gen'rally behind all these here things," he remarked. "Put it down to the police."

"You daren't have told the police anything," exclaimed the duchess. "You—you got—other things there. You daren't go near the police."

But Cappo's bland smile returned.

"In a gen'ral way o' speaking, lady," he said, "it's the police what seeks my company—not me theirs! But now and then—just now and then, me and the police is—friendly like. There is times, you see, lady—like the present—when I can give the police valuable information. And—when they can make it worth my while to do so."

"Are they making it worth your while now?" asked the duchess.

Coppo made no answer. The duchess waited. Coppo consulted the ceiling again. When he next spoke his tone was reflective.

"This is the way of it, lady," he said. "This here insurance company, they prosecute you for fraud. You

tried to get this money from them on the plea that your necklace was pinched—while it never was pinched. They puts me in the witness box——"

"You daren't enter it," interrupted the duchess.

"Ain't you never heard of what they calls King's Evidence, lady?" asked Coppo, innocently. "Oh, yes, lady, I can enter the witness box—fully protected. The police, lady—ah, don't you forget it—the police can work the oracle properly if they like. Yes, I goes into the box, and I tells a straight, plain story of that night's doings, including how you shoved me downstairs and nearly broke my neck!"

"I wish to God I had," said the duchess.

Coppo nodded.

"Yes," he replied. "But you didn't. You got your property back—and proceeded to start bilking the insurance company. Fraud. And what with the insurance company's suspicions, and the detective's suspicions——"

He paused, and for a minute or two there was silence between them. Then Coppo broke it, in a very soft voice:

"Of course, lady," he said, "of course, everything depends on me. I'm the—the pivot on which the whole thing turns. If I'm put in the box—out it all comes. If I don't go in the box—you're safe. Take me, lady?"

The duchess gave him a sharp glance.

"What're you after?" she asked.

"I don't want to do no lady—especially a sport—a bad turn," replied Coppo. "It's against my nature and principles. If I had the ready I'd put a bit o' country, land and water, between me and any blinking police before to-morrow morning. But I ain't. I'm a bit down on my luck just now. Otherwise they wouldn't get me to give no evidence against you, lady—no!"

The duchess exchanged the sharp glance for a long, steady one.

"You mean," she said at last, "you mean that if you'd money you'd be off? Where?"

"Flushing—Middleburg—any o' them places," answered Coppo promptly. "And pretty quick too."

"When?" asked the duchess.

"Before breakfast-time to-morrow," said Coppo.

The duchess hesitated.

"How much do you want?" she inquired at last.

"It's worth a good deal," replied Coppo. "Saves you no end! Exposure—scandal—and, maybe, two years' hard labour, or five years' penal servitude. You'd ought to come down handsome!"

"I asked you how much?" said the duchess. "Look here, my lad! I'll give you a hundred pounds, and that'll be in a check—I don't keep cash in the house. No use whining—not one penny more!"

Coppo grumbled. But there was something about his victim's eye that stopped his grumbling.

"Have to be an open check, then!" he growled at last. "And——"

"No 'ands' about it!" interrupted the duchess. "Not a cent more!" She rose. "Wait here and I'll bring you the check, then—to cash," she said. "No need to put a name on it."

The door opened to admit Parkins, who presented a card. The duchess started a little at sight of it; she murmured something to the maid and followed her out, leaving Coppo to wait. And Coppo waited. Five minutes . . . ten minutes . . . a quarter of an hour. He began to feel restive, uneasy, suspicious. He jumped when the door suddenly opened again. And when he saw what it was that came in, his heart stood still.

What entered was a man—a very big, determined, truculent-looking man, six feet high at least, and correspondingly broad. Coppo knew his sort: he was, without doubt, an army officer, most likely a Guardsman. Coppo rose.

"G—g—good-evening, sir!" he faltered. "I—I——"

"Yes—you—what about you, you sneaking skunk!" demanded the giant. "Where's the pin set in diamonds that you stole from my room at Sir Archibald Selmorton's—eh?"

"Good Lord!" moaned Coppo. "S'elp me, guv'nor ——"

"I'll help you!" said the other. He stretched out a number nine hand and grasped Coppo firmly by the coat collar.

"Lucky I came in just now! You need a man to deal with you! Oh, yes, my lad, I'll help you—to the nearest policeman!"

Late the next day, Coppo, having just been committed for trial and awaiting removal, craved permission of his guardians to take a peep at the evening newspaper. He turned hastily to the legal news. A moment later he groaned, and his jaw dropped. For he read this:

On resumption of the case Dowager Duchess of Hathington *v.* All and Everything Assurance Company in Mr. Justice Starke's court this morning, His Lordship was informed that the jury would not be further troubled with the matter, the parties having come to an agreement. The terms of settlement were not disclosed.

IV

THE FLAT ON THE FOURTH FLOOR

The house agent, who had been fidgeting with the writing materials on his desk for some minutes as if he were in a state of perplexity, suddenly looked up at me with the expression of a man who has just got an idea.

"Of course," he said, "when cheapness is the great thing——"

"And it certainly is with me," I hastened to assure him.

"Why, in that case one doesn't expect too much, does one?" he said, smiling. "You don't want to pay more than a pound a week?"

"I can't afford to pay more than a pound a week," I replied.

He began to fidget again with his pens and papers.

"And yet what you're really asking for is worth more than—much more than that, in this district," he said. "A furnished flat of three rooms and a kitchen is worth more than fifty-two pounds a year, you know. Still ——"

"Yes?" I said, seeing that he had something in his mind.

"I do know of a place that I could let you for a pound a week," he said slowly, "but I don't know whether you would take it, and if you did take it, I'm certain you wouldn't stop in it."

"Why not?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Nobody ever does," he replied. "I've let it to three different tenants during the past six months—none of them stayed longer than a fortnight. They—they say it's haunted."

I laughed. At the sound of my laughter the house agent looked up sharply, and I saw that he was a superstitious man.

"Yes, that's all very well," he said. "But—I'm not so sure that this isn't."

I smiled at him.

"If that's all," I said, "it leaves me unmoved. I had far rather hear something practical about it. Where is it? Is it decently furnished? Is it what I want?"

"Oh, as to all that!" he said, with a comprehensive wave of his hand. "Yes—I should say it's just what you want. It's in Bury Street, and so close to the museum—that was your first requirement, wasn't it? It's very well furnished indeed, and there's a sitting room, two bedrooms, and a small kitchen. Certainly, it's on the fourth floor, and there's no lift, but——"

He looked at me as much as to say that I was young and strong enough to climb a dozen floors if necessary.

"I don't mind that," said I. "And I'll go and see it now—I suppose there is a housekeeper or caretaker?"

"You'll find her in the basement, and she has the keys," he answered.

"And if I take it I can move in to-morrow?" I inquired, making for the door.

"Move in to-day, with pleasure, if you like," he replied wearily. "But you'll never stop, you know. There's something wrong with that place."

I made no answer to this, but set off to the address he gave me, laughing a little at the mere notion of any

level-headed business man being so sentimental as to believe in haunted houses. Quite unafflicted by nerves myself, possessing a remarkably sound constitution and enjoying health which was almost riotously rude, I could not then understand how anyone could believe in ghosts or spirits or spooks, much less how they could let such a belief centre in such a very commonplace affair as a London flat. No!—if the rooms were what I wanted and to be had at a pound a week I should take them, despite all the ghosts that ever were made. My life was too strenuous to allow of ghosts coming into it.

I found the house in Bury Street without difficulty and, descending to the basement, unearthed the caretaker—an elderly woman of the usual type, who looked somewhat surprised on learning my business, but immediately produced a small bunch of keys and prepared to mount the stairs.

"I'm a bit surprised that Mr. Watkinson should send anybody to look at them rooms," she said, as she wheezed and panted her way upstairs. "If anybody ever does take 'em they never stops in 'em. Nobody ever has stopped in 'em since Mr. Dysart left, and that's two years ago. Not but what there has been tenants—Mr. Goode, and Mr. Macpherson, and Mr. Charlesworth, and Mr. Leeming—but a week or two was enough to settle any of 'em. Nobody can't live long in these rooms—not if they're Christian folks as loves quietness and peace."

"Well, and why?" I demanded.

"'Cause they're haunted," she answered. "And——"

A long, dismal howl came pealing down the somewhat dark staircase up which we were climbing. It was repeated again—and then again. The woman half paused, and seized the banisters.

"Blessed if they aren't at it again!" she exclaimed. "That's the second lot that's got in this morning—unless it's the same lot come back again."

"But what is it?" I asked.

"What is it?" she repeated. "It's cats—that's what it is—cats! I don't know what possesses of 'em, but as soon as that street door's open they sneak in and get upstairs to the door of this here flat as you're a-goin' to look at, and there they sit theirselves down and yowl at the top of their voices, drat 'em! Done that these two year past, they have. Look you there, now!"

We had climbed to the fourth floor by that time, and I now beheld the outer door of the flat which I proposed to take. There was a stone landing before it, and on this sat an enormous black cat which, as we came in sight of it, was just lifting its head for another yell. Behind it, mewing in a peculiarly distressful fashion, a yellow cat, mangy and unkempt, prowled up and down restlessly, like a tiger in a cage.

"Them's two fresh 'uns," said the caretaker, and she kicked the offending animals downstairs. "I ain't seen neither o' them before. Lord bless yer!—you'd wonder where they all come from and what it is they want. They started coming just before Mr. Dysart left, and they've come ever since. Mr. Dysart, he never kept no cats, and if he'd only lived he'd never have stood these, but of course he came to a sudden end."

"What was that?" I inquired.

"Fell down some precipice in foreign parts and killed hisself," she replied. "And so, of course, he never came back here. These are the rooms, sir."

She unlocked the outer door of the flat and ushered me through a very small lobby into what was evidently the sitting room. I took a fancy to it at once—it was a

room of some size, well lighted by two windows, and well furnished in a plain, substantial way. I saw at a glance that with my books and pictures I could make it into the sort of room I desired, and I determined that if the bedrooms were equally satisfactory I'd go back at once to the house agent's and conclude my bargain.

"There's one thing about these rooms that's very convenient," said the caretaker, who was looking about her in a casual sort of fashion, "and that is they've plenty of cupboards, which is uncommonly needful things. Now there's a cupboard there that Mr. Dysart left locked when he went away to break his poor neck, and he took the key with him, so it's never been opened since, 'cause nobody's ever wanted it. They're good bedrooms, too, sir."

The entire place suited me, and I told the caretaker, whose name turned out to be Mrs. Brixon, to see that one of the beds was thoroughly aired at once, that I should begin moving my goods in that afternoon. When I had given her half a sovereign as an earnest of my good intentions toward her she expressed a hope that I might find myself able to live in the flat, but it was quite evident that she considered that a hopeless eventuality.

"None of 'em never did," she said. "At least never since them cats come."

At that moment a gaunt gray cat came slinking in through the little lobby and tried to get into the sitting room. Mrs. Brixon chivvied it out—outside the door it set up a long, mournful cry.

I certainly did not understand this cat business, but it did not cause me any uneasiness, and I went straight back to the house agent, told him I would take the rooms, and drew out my check book. He shook his head—almost mournfully.

"Pay as much as you like in advance," he said. "If I were you I wouldn't pay more than a month, anyway. You'll never last it out, you know."

"I'll pay you for three months in advance," I said, "and after that every month. The rooms are just what I want."

He took my check and began to write out a receipt.

"You didn't see any cats, then?" he asked uneasily.

"Three," I replied. "A black one, a yellow one, a gray one. I also heard them."

He looked at me wonderingly.

"And you're going to stand *that!*" he said. "You must have a nerve. But, of course, you're young."

"Just so," I replied.

He pushed his chair back and passed his hand over his forehead.

"Those cats puzzle me altogether," he said. "What do they congregate about that particular door for? You see, in a place like that, where there are several sets of flats, you can't have the street doors always shut, and Mrs. Brixon tells me that you'd really have to put a sentry on guard to keep those cats out. They first began coming just before Dysart went off to Switzerland—he was the last tenant there who lived in the flat any length of time—he'd been there, I should say, seven years."

"Who was Dysart?" I asked.

"He was in the Egyptian Antiquities room at the British Museum," he answered. "A very clever man, I believe. Came to a sad end, poor fellow. He was an enthusiastic climber, and used to go to Switzerland every year. He fell down somewhere—on the Matterhorn, I believe, and was killed."

"Was he fond of cats?" I asked.

The house agent looked his wonder at this question.

"I merely thought that these cats were bewailing his loss," I said.

He shook his head in disapproval of my levity.

"It's a queer business," he said. "I hope you'll be comfortable."

"It'll be my own fault if I'm not," I answered.

Then I bade him good-morning and went away to begin my arrangements for removing from the Bloomsbury boarding house in which I had resided for two years, and where I had accumulated such a quantity of books and pictures that I really required larger quarters. All that afternoon and evening and all the next day I was busily engaged in moving to the flat and in putting things to my liking there; it was well toward the second evening that everything looked homelike and in accordance with my wishes. I had got all my bookcases into their proper positions; my desk and papers in order; my own pictures on the walls—I felt quite at home as I glanced about me in the cheery light of a good fire. And then I went out to dine, and at dinner met Alderson, with whom I had been at school, and who was then at University College, and after dinner Alderson and I walked back to the flat to have a sort of housewarming and a peaceful pipe.

As we went up the stairs a wail of unspeakable woe came echoing from the upper regions, and Alderson jumped.

"What on earth is that?" he exclaimed.

"Only a cat," I answered. "Just a cat."

"Just a cat—only a cat!" he said. "Good heavens!—it sounded like the wail of a lost spirit. What's the beggar after?"

"Come up quietly," I said. "Perhaps you'll see something."

We advanced to the fourth floor as gently as we could, and I held Alderson back and pointed.

There were five cats sitting round my door in a semicircle, and a sixth, the mangy yellow beast of the previous morning, was raging up and down again, restlessly. At the sound of our feet they fled, rushing over each other and past us down the stairs with snarls and yells of disappointment at something. But at what?

I told Alderson all about it over a pipe and a drop of whisky. He listened with open mouth and staring eyes, and at the end he shook his head.

"I'll tell you what, old chap," he said solemnly, "I don't like all that. It's queer. It's uncanny. Cats are strange things. Cats, I believe, were sacred animals in Egypt. If I were in this place——"

He paused and eyed me curiously.

"Well?" I said.

"I shouldn't like to live alone here—that's all," he said diffidently. "I'll bet there's a cat outside there just now."

"Look," said I.

He got up very quietly, tip-toed across to the door, crossed the little lobby, and opened the outer door suddenly. There, its great yellow eyes glaring balefully at us in the lamplight, sat the big black cat which I had seen on my visit of inspection. It rose as Alderson advanced toward it, arched its back, spat out a curse, and vanished howling down the staircase.

Alderson shut the door and coming back, picked up his glass and drank off its contents at one gulp. I noticed that his hand trembled.

"I don't like that," he said shortly. "It's—nasty. You'll never stick it out here, Berners."

"Shan't I?" I retorted. "So everybody says. But we'll see. What harm can a company of cats do? I'm out most of the day, and those doors are thick enough to drown their music at night."

He shook his head.

"It isn't that," he said. "I'm not nervy, and I'm not afraid of anything I can tackle. But—what do those cats come here for?"

"Why do cats go anywhere?" I asked. "Perhaps somebody who lived in these rooms used to feed them once upon a time, and they've remembered it, and——"

"No," he said, with emphasis. "And it isn't that, either. Those cats come for something. There's something calls them."

I laughed.

"Oh, come, Alderson!" I said. "That's silliness. What is there that could call them?"

He shook his head more solemnly than ever.

"I don't know," he said. "How can one tell? You see, you never knew anything about the rooms. How do you know what secrets this room mayn't hold, confined in an atmosphere which you can't feel? It may, you know."

"Do you feel anything?" I asked.

He glanced round about him, looking into the dark corners of the room with eyes which seemed to me a little troubled.

"I don't know," he said dubiously. "But—I think there is a queer feeling about this room. You know, I—well, I am a little susceptible to that sort of thing. And——"

From outside the double doors came the prolonged

howl of a cat—not the ordinary cry that one hears at midnight from one's area, but a dismal, protesting, appealing wail. Alderson jumped to his feet, and I saw beads of perspiration break out on his forehead.

"Look here, Berners!" he burst out. "It's no good, old chap!—I can't stand this. I'm going. Take my advice and come with me. Berners!—there's something in this room."

"Yes, of course there is," I said chaffingly. "We're here, you and I. Don't be an ass, Alderson."

But it was no use—he was struck by the worst kind of fright, and I recognized the hopelessness of trying to keep him. He put his overcoat on all in a heap—and once more begged me to go back with him to his rooms in Gower Street. I laughed at him again and said I'd walk there with him, and after I'd turned down my lamp we went out.

The black cat had come back and was sitting opposite the outer door.

Alderson burst into a shriek of hysterical laughter—I had to seize him by the collar and shake him. As I shook him he began to talk incoherently—and while he talked the cat uttered a horrible yell and once more fled down the stairs. At the foot of the first landing it stopped, turned, and arching its back, spat out curses that seemed almost human.

I closed the doors and got Alderson downstairs. The door into the street was shut—as I opened it a great gray cat, lean and fierce-eyed, which had evidently been waiting on the step, slipped in between us and went up the stairs in a flash. And again Alderson began to laugh like a maniac. He gripped me by the lapels of my coat, and grinned at me. I had to use force to extricate myself.

"For God's sake, don't be such a damned fool, Alderson!" I said. "You'll lose your reason in another minute. Pull yourself together!"

"The cat!" he said. "The cat! Oh, my God! Let me get away—anywhere!"

I hurried him off in the direction of Gower Street, and walked him the whole length of it northward, and then down again to the door of his lodgings. He was becoming calmer by that time, and at his invitation I went in with him. As soon as we were in his room he went to a cupboard and brought out a decanter of whisky, and without a word poured out half a tumblerful of spirit and drank it neat. For a moment he stood staring vacantly at the glass in his hand—then he set it down and turned to me.

"Berners!" he said in a solemn voice. "As you value your immortal soul, don't sleep in that accursed place to-night. It's *haunted!*"

I picked up my hat and turned to the door.

"If you're going to talk that sort of stuff, Alderson," I said quietly, "I'm going home. It's silly."

He shook his head—shook it in a fashion which showed that he despaired of convincing me.

"No, Berners," he said sadly, "it isn't silly. I wish it were silly. But it isn't. I tell you that place is haunted. And it's haunted by something—unholy. For heaven's sake, Berners——"

"Oh, good-night, Alderson!" I said, and flung out of the room and the house, sick to death of his silly vapouring. Walking away from the house, I wondered how a bright, cheery chap like Alderson, always healthy-minded, first in games, instinct with good sense, could be so silly as to behave like that. Thinking the events of the evening over seriously, I came to the conclusion

that he had probably been working too hard and had got overwrought—and with that reflection I dismissed the matter.

I walked back to Bury Street and climbed the long flight of steps to the fourth floor. Everything was quiet —this time there was neither sight nor sound of cats. And when I opened my door and saw my comfortable sitting room, with all my books and pictures and papers and small belongings, I laughed to think that Alderson could have been so foolish—certainly I was not going to be upset because a stray cat or two came prowling round.

I was just then working hard for an examination, and I lighted my pipe, got out certain books and papers, and set to work on a couple of hours' steady grind before going to bed. During all that time I heard nothing save the subdued rumble of the traffic in High Holborn. The rooms were admirably quiet, and in that respect everything that I wanted. Before midnight I was so well pleased with them that I thanked my lucky stars for the chance which had put them in my way so cheaply.

I turned out my lamp at twelve o'clock and went into my bedroom. There was no light there, and the blinds were still up. I was feeling about on the dressing table for a box of matches when suddenly I *felt* that something was watching me, and turning my head with a quick, instinctive movement I saw on the ledge outside the window the figure of a huge cat, silhouetted against the dim light of the street below. Its eyes, baleful, yellow, magnified by the glass, were fixed full upon mine.

I lost my head. My hand at that instant fell upon the matches, and I hurled the box with all my force at the staring eyes. The box exploded as it struck the glass, and the matches burst into a spluttering, phosphor-

escent glitter that almost instantly died away in an evil-smelling smoke. When I had seen that nothing was going to be set on fire, and had thrown the box into a pail of water, the cat with the saucerlike eyes was gone.

I opened the window and looked out and found that a broadish ledge ran all along the front of that house and the houses on either side of it. The cat had evidently come along it. But—why?

I confess that by this time I was beginning to feel somewhat—well, not afraid, but puzzled. Why did these cats keep up such a persistent attention to this particular flat? What did they want?

I lighted a candle, let down my blind, and went, in due course, to bed. And, having had a trying day, I soon fell asleep.

It was just two hours later that I awoke. I awoke quite suddenly—and was instantly wide awake. My head was clear—my faculties sharp beyond the normal. As I opened my eyes I sat up in bed, every sense on the alert. In the heavy silence I heard my heart thumping heavily against my breast. And I *felt* once again that something was there. What?

It was not in that room, however—that I knew at once. It was in the next—the sitting room. Between it and me there was a wall and a closed door. But It was there. Was I going to open the door or was It?

I slipped out of bed after a few minutes of breathless indecision and went softly across to the door. That I should see something when I opened that door which I had never seen in my life I was assured of—yet I could not have explained to anyone (or to myself) why I was assured of my assurance.

I could not say with certainty how long it was before I opened the door. But I did open it.

The sitting room was all in darkness—I had drawn the heavy curtains before the windows when I sat down to my work, and the last gleam of the fire in the grate had long since died out. And in the darkness—I *saw*.

I have never believed in what one vulgarly terms ghosts—I do not believe in them, in the common acceptation, now—and in this matter I can only speak of what I do actually believe I saw. In the midst of the darkness there was gradually vizualized a woman's face—the face of an Egyptian, dark, grave, austere, and on her forehead the insignia of royalty. And out of the darkness came the mingling of many strange scents and an odour of old cedarwood. . . . The vision became clear-cut, intense—and suddenly faded into darkness again. I had caught up the matches as I passed the dressing table, and now I struck one, and as I struck it the long, wailing cry of a cat came from—where? That was it—where? It was not outside the flat, nor inside the flat, so far as I could tell. Where, then, was it?

I did not go to bed again that night. Instead, I lighted my lamp and my fire and tried to read. The attempt ended in failure, and I was conscious that whatever I might say or think there was something uncanny about the rooms—just as Alderson had said.

Going out early in the morning to get my breakfast, I met the housekeeper on the stairs. She looked at me inquiringly, and I saw that she was wondering what sort of night I had spent. A sudden thought occurred to me, and after bidding her a curt good-morning, I called her back.

"Do you know where any of those gentlemen live who had the flat before I had it?" I inquired.

"I know where Mr. Leeming lives—him what was here last," she said. "Which it's in Hart Street, close by

—there's his name on a brass plate on a door—left-hand side of the street."

I nodded and went on my way. Later in the morning I called on Mr. Leeming, who seemed to be an author or a journalist from the look of his room. He stared at me curiously.

"Good-morning," I said. "Forgive me for intruding upon you, but I wished to ask you a question. You used to occupy a flat in Bury Street, didn't you?"

You should have seen the change which came over the man's face. He was seated at a writing table in the centre of the room, and he pushed back his chair from it and held up his hands before his face as if he thought I was going to strike him.

"For God's sake!" he said in a queer, strained voice. "Don't talk to me about that place! Don't, I say!—it gives me the horrors to think of it—even to think of it."

"So I see," I said, and moved backward to the door. "Pardon me for disturbing you."

"Stop!" he said, as I was going out. He gazed at me with an air of great interest. "You don't mean to say that you are living there?" he asked.

"I moved in yesterday," I replied.

He stared at me with all his eyes.

"Take my advice and move out—to-day!" he said, and settled down to his writing again.

That might be very good advice, but I had no intention of taking it. I must make a fight before acknowledging defeat. Yet the prospect of another night like the last was not pleasant. The vision of the Egyptian woman had been too real.

Now, I had a friend in the British Museum in whose good sense I felt a profound trust, and at lunch-time

I went out and found him and told him all the story. He agreed to come and spend the evening and the night with me in Bury Street—just to see what would happen.

Going in and out of the flat during that, my second, day, I invariably found a cat or cats on the landing. As it grew toward dusk the big black cat came again, and I had to chase it into the street. Later I discovered it on the sill, staring in at the window of my bedroom.

Evanson—the man from the museum—dined with me that night; we got back to the flat about nine o'clock. There were no cats on the landing when we came in, and we heard nothing of any of them until just before midnight, when one began mewing most pitifully outside the door. And having already decided on our plan of action, I opened both doors and gave the cats full chance of entry.

There were three of them—the black one which I had seen so often, the mangy yellow one, and a tortoise-shell thing that was half skin and bone. They came inside the room, making the most curious sounds. And once across the threshold *they crawled on their bellies.*

What they crawled to was the locked cupboard to which Mrs. Brixon had referred. They got to the foot of the door and whined like dogs. And Evanson and I stood by and watched—and we felt afraid in the worst way.

"That cupboard's got to be broken into!" whispered Evanson.

I got out some tools and we went to work, the cats drawing back and watching us with eyes in which was almost human intelligence. The door was strong, and it took some time to get it open, but at last it swung wide, and we looked into the cupboard.

There, on the middle shelf, was the mummy of a cat,

and from its cerements stole to our nostrils an odour of Eastern spices and of sandalwood. . . .

Evanson gripped my arm as he stared at this weird object.

"By heavens, Berners!" he said, "that's the cat that was stolen from the museum two years ago—the sacred cat of the Princess Amenartes!—used to rest at the feet of her mummy!"

We restored the mummy of the sacred cat to the museum authorities next day, with an account of how we had found it. And since then no cats have troubled me in Bury Street—nor have I seen any visions.

V

THE WIDOW OF PORT BRIDDLE

"If I'd ha' known," remarked Mr. Skinner, as he lounged up to Mr. Parker's elbow at the ship's rail and indignantly gazed across the placid waters of Briddle Bay, "if I'd ha' known as how the old man was a-goin' to put into this here Port Briddle, I'd ha' hooked it at Falmouth. The idea of comin' in here!"

"We ain't in yet," said Mr. Parker. "And it strikes me we ain't a-goin' to be, in a hurry. Not till there's more of a tide, anyway."

Mr. Skinner made no immediate reply. He folded his arms on the rail, and looked out across the half mile of water which separated the *Daniel Peters* from shore, and such humanity as was to be found at that particular point of a lonely coast. His eyes rested on a collection of quaint gray roofs and walls, one half of which appeared to be in a condition of ruin. They were grouped, higgledy piggledy fashion, about a small harbour, or basin, from the seaward side of which two ancient stone piers ran out into the surf. Among them might be discerned an inn or two, two or three shops, various masts and spars from which fluttered disconsolate-looking flags, and, on the beach itself, a few wooden bungalows, the obvious dwelling places for the time being of folk who loved out-of-the-way life and primitive conditions.

Inland, cutting off the little port from the chain of

blue hills which rose in the distance, stretched a wide marsh, on which horses and cattle were liberally distributed; through its fields and meadows, just then very gay with daisies and buttercups, Mr. Skinner could perceive many loverlike-looking couples strolling seaward from the small town at the foot of the hills, and he heaved a deep sigh, which was born half of emotion and half of trouble.

"You're a true friend to me, ain't you, Bill?" he said huskily. "You're the sort to stand by a pal, ain't you?"

Mr. Parker made a noise in his throat.

"I might be," he replied guardedly. "You don't want to borrow nothing, Shifty, do yer? 'Cause I ain't got it."

"I don't want to borrow nothing," said Mr. Skinner, with great disdain. "Got plenty o' me own, I have. No, Bill, what's troubling me isn't money. I foresee trouble ahead, Bill—that's what I foresee; bad trouble, what might alter all the course of my life, Bill. Oh, I wish I hadn't never come this trip, or had been took bad at Falmouth or somewhere and had to go home!"

"What's it all about, Shifty?" asked Mr. Parker. "Spit it out."

Mr. Skinner took his pipe out of his mouth and, using the stem as a pointer, indicated the little port off which the *Daniel Peters* had arrived only two hours previously.

"It's all about this here place, Bill," he said. "You sees the lie of it? Well, you ain't never been here before, says you. I wish I hadn't! I wish the old man ha' put in anywhere but here. This here place, Bill, this Port Briddle, as they calls it, is well known to men as has used the sea longer nor what you have, as being the difficultest place on the English coast to get into or get

out of. Let a vessel get into that there harbour, Bill, and bad weather come on, and there she is. Oh, yes, don't I know it!"

"Well?" said Mr. Parker. "What of that?"

Mr. Skinner refilled his pipe, and lighted it carefully.

"The *Daniel Peters* was here last year, Bill," he said presently. "Me and the skipper's the only two aboard now as was here that time, all the rest of you being new to her. Oil-cake and cotton-cake we brought round from Rochester, and, of course, went in to unload. And then bad weather come on, Bill, and there we was, a-jammed into that harbour for three mortal weeks—three weeks, Bill, and nothin' to do!"

"Ain't there no pubs in the place?" inquired Mr. Parker.

"There is," answered Mr. Skinner, sighing deeply. "There's three pubs. It was all along of a pub—which is to say, something as I found in a pub—as I'm in trouble, or going to be. You see, Bill, we hadn't nothing to do that three weeks, and when a man ain't doing nothing, why, it stands to reason that he takes to sitting in pubs, don't it?"

"Well, and what then?" said Mr. Parker. "What's all this here trouble that you're a-talkin' of and don't get to? Give it a name!"

Mr. Skinner puffed out a cloud of blue smoke and shook his head.

"The Commodore and Capstan was the pub I used," he said. "That's it, at the side of the harbour, with a wooden image, painted lifelike, over the door. I tremble to think of what may happen if I sticks my face inside there, Bill—I really do."

"It might turn the beer sour," observed Mr. Parker. "But seeing as you're more partial to rum, Shifty, that

wouldn't be no great trouble to you. And what is this here trouble?"

Mr. Skinner emitted more smoke, and gazed thoughtfully at the thatched roof of the Commodore and Capstan.

"Vashti Grayne," he murmured. "Vashti Grayne—that's what the name is. A uncommon name that, Bill, ain't it?"

"Well, who on earth is Vashti Grayne?" demanded Mr. Parker. "Is it a man or a woman, or a race horse, or what?"

"Landlady of the pub, Bill," replied Mr. Skinner. "You can read it on the sign, if you're close enough. 'The Commodore and Capstan. Licensed to be drunk on the premises. Good accommodation for treavellers. By Vashti Grayne.' Them's the very words, Bill—I learnt 'em by heart, goin' there so often. Yes, Vashti Grayne, Mrs. Grayne, that is. A widder-woman, Bill."

"What sort of a widder-woman?" inquired Mr. Parker.

"A young widder-woman," answered Mr. Skinner. "At least, youngish. Just at that age, Bill, when a widder feels as if she'd like to commit matrimony again, you know."

"No, I don't," said Mr. Parker. "I don't know nothing about widders—I've always steered clear of 'em."

"I wish I had!" sighed Mr. Skinner. "Leastways, I wish I'd steered clear o' this one. But you see, Bill, me having nothing to do that three weeks, of course, this here Vashti Grayne got a-making love to me, and when I went off I promised that I'd come back and marry her."

"And why didn't you?" asked Mr. Parker. "A public house is a nice thing to marry—not that there seems to be much chance of trade in this hole."

"Oh, she's a nice connection, has Mrs. Grayne," said

Mr. Skinner. "It's wonderful what a lot of spare time the folks has here, Bill, and they nat'rally sits about in the pubs a deal. But I couldn't do it, Bill—it was no use, when I come to think it over. And, of course, there was another reason, 'cause between you an' me, Bill, you bein' a pal o' mine, I got a wife already at home in Wapping."

"What d'you mean, then, by making love to widders?" demanded Mr. Parker. "Ain't you ashamed o' yourself a-doin' of such things?"

"I didn't say I made love, Bill," said Mr. Skinner apologetically. "I said she did. You see, I walked out, friendly-like, a time or two, and p'raps there may have been a bit of kissin', and such like, but I never meant nothing. Only she began to talk about it being lonely there at the Commodore and Capstan, and she hinted that the place ought to have a master, and one thing led to another, and so, of course, as I knew that it wasn't likely that I should ever come this way again, I promised faithful that I'd turn up and marry her as soon as ever I'd got my affairs settled up. Of course, Bill, I hadn't none to settle."

"It strikes me as you're in for a nice mess," observed Mr. Parker. "It's agen the law to promise to marry widders when you're a wed man already."

"I know it is, Bill, I know it is!" said Mr. Skinner. "But what could I do, Bill, under them circumstances?"

"That isn't the p'int," declared Mr. Parker. "The p'int is, what're you going to do under present circumstances? If that there widder gets to know you're here there'll be the deuce to pay."

"Aye, but she mustn't, Bill, she really mustn't!" exclaimed Mr. Skinner. "It 'ud be terrible if she got to know that, Bill."

Mr. Parker assumed a countenance of stern determination.

"Now, look here, Shifty," he said. "This here affair is more serious nor you think. I had a cousin as was sued for this breach of promise, as they call it, and it cost him two hundred and odd quid. I don't say as how this'll cost you all that, but cost you something it will, and that's a fact."

"Do you think so, Bill? do you really think so?" said Mr. Skinner. "Why will it, Bill?"

"Now, you listen to me," answered Mr. Parker. "I happen to know why we've come in here. The skipper's goin' to take a cargo of wood away, and we'll be in that harbour most of a week, Shifty. How're you a-goin' to avoid detection, as they calls it in the papers?"

Mr. Skinner began to perspire with fear. He looked uneasily about him, as if he meditated flight.

"There's only two things to be done, Shifty," continued Mr. Parker. "The first is—you'll have to square the other fellers. Let's see, there's Ginger McFarlane, and Paddy Rooney, and Conky Tom. That's three—and of course, there's meself—that's four. Only you'd ought to give me more than what you give them, 'cause I'm your pal, d'ye see?"

"Y-yes," said Mr. Skinner. "I see, Bill. How much d'yer think 'ud be reasonable, Bill? I'm a wed man, remember."

"Well, a quid for me, and five bob apiece for them," said Mr. Parker. "That's a very reasonable figger. We'll fix it up with 'em presently, and you can fork out the money—you've got it in your locker, ain't you? Of course, it's to be a bargain—nobody is to breathe a word about your being on board the *Daniel Peters* this turn, and everybody's to swear solemn to help you to escape

observation, as the sayin' is. Thirty-five bob that'll cost you, Shifty, and dirt cheap."

"Thirty-five bob is a lot o' money, Bill," said Mr. Skinner. "Couldn't——"

"Two hundred and odd quid it cost my cousin," remarked Mr. Parker musingly. "But he was a single man. Of course, a wed man——"

"All right, Bill, all right!" said Mr. Skinner. "I'll get the money, Bill. But what about the other thing that you said must be done?"

"Ah!" said Mr. Parker. "You'll have to go sick. Otherwise 'tain't no good, however much you squares me and the other chaps. You see, if you was to be seen on deck, or on the quay, while we was in there, why, of course, this here widder with the heathen name 'ud get to hear of it, and then—well, you know her, and I don't."

"Yes, yes, Bill," assented Mr. Skinner. "Yes, it would certainly be best to lie low. What shall I have, Bill? I don't want to have nothing that 'ud interfere with vittals, you know."

"General debility's what you're going to have," answered Mr. Parker. "As soon as we gets into that harbour you'll be took with a sort of weakness all over, so's you can't get out of your bunk. It might be advisable to lose your appetite at first, 'cause that'll impress the old man, and the rest of us can always get you something extra on the quiet, if so be as you're willing to make it worth our while, you know, Shifty, 'cause it wouldn't be right to put ourselves to so much trouble for nothing. Yes, general debility's the ticket. You've been feeling poorly, and not up to much for some time, haven't you?"

"Well, I don't mind going to two pound," said Mr.

Skinner reluctantly. "I think two pound is handsome."

"It'll do to start with," said Mr. Parker. "Where would you be, I should like to know, if the widder got a look in at you? You go and get the money, Shifty, and we'll see the other chaps. And look here—which o' them pubs did the skipper patronize when you and him was here before?"

"Not the Commodore and Capstan," answered Mr. Skinner. "There's a more aristocratic one at the head of the harbour—the Crown and Crumpet. That's where he went."

"Then you're all right," said Mr. Parker. "He'll go where he's been used to going. You've nothing to do but to square me and the other fellows. Step along for the money, Shifty."

That night, at high water, the *Daniel Peters* managed to squeeze herself in between the two piers, and to make fast to a wharf which lay exactly in front of the Commodore and Capstan, and by breakfast time next morning her skipper was fetched to see Shifty Skinner, who lay in his bunk, making doleful faces and uttering occasional sighs, which were genuine enough, seeing that they arose of themselves whenever Shifty thought of the two pounds which he had paid out to his shipmates the previous evening. The skipper regarded him with a frown.

"What's gone wrong with you?" he asked grumblingly. "You was all right yesterday."

"No, I wasn't," answered Shifty. "I ain't been all right since we set out on this turn, and I was poorly at Falmouth—I got a eighteen-penny bottle of doctor's stuff there, only it hasn't done me no good. Conky Tom there knows as how I haven't eaten right for a week past."

"Well, I don't know what to do for you," said the skipper. "Will you have a dose of my mixture?"

"No!" answered Shifty. "I don't want no mixtures. What I seem to want is rest. I ache if I stand up or walk about. If I'm lying down I feel at ease, so to speak."

"Well, keep lying down, then," said the skipper. "And mind you don't have anything to drink, 'cause if you're sickening for anything it'll bring it on. You better live on slops for a day or two—you look to me as if you made too much blood."

Then the skipper went off, and presently journeyed ashore, and Mr. Parker, the coast being clear, leaned confidentially over the sufferer's bunk.

"The old man's hooked it to the Crown and Crumpet," he said. "Look here, Shifty, I'll tell you what I'll do for you—I'll step across to this here pub o' yours and see if I can find out anything about that widder. I've done a bit of what they call amatoor detective business in my time, and I might discover something—how she's taken it, and so on, d'yer see? Then you'll have a quieter conscience, Shifty, 'cause you'll know the worst."

"Only don't let her know I'm here!" implored Mr. Skinner. "I wouldn't have that happen for—for nothing!"

"Well, of course, you might have to fork out another quid or two, you know," Mr. Parker observed carelessly. "But I'll see how things are. When the enemy's in sight, Shifty, there's nothing like a bit of scouting business. I'll go and see what the state of affairs is."

With that Mr. Parker, having said a word or two to his other shipmates, went over the plank and ploughed his way through a wilderness of shingle toward the door of the Commodore and Capstan. He gazed at the wooden effigy over the door and at the sign beneath, and he sud-

denly stopped and stared at the sign with renewed interest. For the name Vashti Grayne was no longer there; in its stead appeared an announcement to the effect that the inn was kept by Mr. and Mrs. Saul Geach. Mr. Parker turned to an ancient person who sat on a stump of wood sucking with toothless lips at an abbreviated clay pipe.

"When I was last here," observed Mr. Parker solemnly, "this here public house was kept by Mrs. Vashti Grayne. You don't mean to say as how she's dead and gone?"

"Her baint dead, nor yet gone," answered the ancient one. "Her've changed her condition—that's what have happened to she. Her'm Mrs. Saul Geach there—married Saul Geash last back-end, her did. And there she be, come to the door, so large as life, sure-ly!"

Mr. Parker gazed critically at the landlady. She was a tallish, well-made, buxom, likely-looking woman, of apparently thirty-five years of age; her dark eyes and her general appearance impressed the beholder considerably, and he removed his cap as he stepped up to the door of the inn and followed its proprietress within the old-fashioned bar. Mrs. Geach, on her part, viewed Mr. Parker with interest.

"I suppose you're off the *Daniel Peters?*" she remarked, when she had served him with rum.

"Yes, mum," replied Mr. Parker. "That's my vessel, mum. We've come in to fetch a load of wood."

"The *Daniel Peters* was here—oh, more than a year ago," said the landlady. "But I don't remember you."

"No, mum. I didn't belong to her, then," said Mr. Parker. "I joined her just after that, mum. Yes, many's the time I've heard of her being at Port Briddle—oh, yes, mum. My poor shipmate, Corny Skinner—Cor-

nelius his proper name was, mum—talked of Port Briddle—yes, indeed!"

"What do you call him 'poor shipmate' for?" asked Mrs. Geach sharply.

Mr. Parker sighed and looked at the fly-blown ceiling.

"Well, p'raps 'poor' is hardly the word, mum," he replied. "He may be far better off nor what he was here. And again, he mayn't. You never know what a man's life really is, do you, mum? Some of them as seems so good may be nothing but white-washed sepulchres, as the saying is."

"You don't mean that the man's dead?" exclaimed Mrs. Geach.

Mr. Parker sighed into the rum, and shook his head over it.

"Died in my arms, mum," he answered.

"Deary me!" said Mrs. Geach. "Well, I never! I was going to ask you if he was on board. I—well, I saw a good bit of him when he was here last year—in fact, he asked me to marry him."

"Yes, mum," said Mr. Parker. "I'm aware of it. He told me about it, mum. His last words were of you. 'She was a fine woman, Bill,' he says. 'I wasn't noways worthy of her,' he says, just like that. 'She was far, far above me,' he says. 'As handsome a woman,' he says, 'as you'd see between Land's End and Dover,' he says. Poor Corny, he'd a soft heart, mum."

"Well, I am surprised!" said the landlady. "Of course, I thought it a very queer thing that he never wrote. And when and where did he die, mister? Let me give you a drop more rum."

"Thanking you kindly, mum," said Mr. Parker. "My respects, mum, to you and to your master. Poor Corny! Well, he died, mum, as it might be this time of

the year; yes, it was May, 'cause I remember there was buttercups and daisies in the cemetery where we put him away."

"Bless me!" said the landlady. "Why, that 'ud be about a month or so after he was here!"

"Yes, mum," assented Mr. Parker. "It would, mum. We was at Port Madoc then, mum, getting a cargo of slates. It was slates as killed him, poor feller! He was crushed, mum, crushed right into a shapeless mass. He said them words, mum, what I've told you of, and then expired. Otherwise," continued Mr. Parker, "otherwise, mum, you'd have found him at your feet, as it says in the poetry books."

"Well, he didn't come, and I didn't hear, and we all know what sailor men are," said the landlady, "and I had a good offer and so I took it. Poor fellow! And so he's buried at—where did you say?"

"Port Madoc, mum—a place in Wales," answered Mr. Parker. "It's a very nice cemetery there, mum, and some of us are thinking of raising a bit of a monument to Corny. A nice, quiet headstone, with a bit of poetry on it—we're going to see about it next time we're in that port."

"Are you indeed?" said Mrs. Geach. "Well, really, I never expected to hear such bad news as that. I wondered what had become of him. And so he's dead!"

"Dead and gone, mum," replied Mr. Parker solemnly. "Dead—and gone. Forever!"

Then Mrs. Geach was called away, and Mr. Parker presently went out and, returning to the ship, gathered Messrs. Ginger MacFarlane, Paddy Rooney, and Conky Tom together, and impressed upon them that they must on no account make Shifty Skinner aware of the fact that Mrs. Grayne had become Mrs. Geach, for Shifty

had still money in his locker which must be diverted into their own pockets. And having duly sworn them to silence, he repaired to Mr. Skinner, who was already sick of his sickness, and shut himself up with him.

"This is a bad job, Shifty," said Mr. Parker, with an air of profound concern. "A much worser job than I thought it would be. She's got to know that you're here."

Mr. Skinner groaned.

"I don't know what you'll do," continued Mr. Parker. "There's all sorts of dockyments out against you—writs, and summonses, and such-like. A lawyer and a policeman might be down on you at any moment. It all depends on her. I never see a woman in such a rage. You treated her very bad, Shifty—there's no denyin' of it."

"Can't nothin' be done?" moaned Mr. Skinner. "Didn't you talk to her?"

"I talked particular nice to her about you," answered Mr. Parker. "I told her you suffered serious from loss of memory, and that two London doctors had said that you wasn't responsible for what you promised when you was in that condition. But it wasn't no good—it seems she spent a lot in getting her troosoo ready, and she vows and declares she'll make you pay. How much money have you got, Shifty?"

"Whaffor?" asked Mr. Skinner, with painful haste.

"What for?" said Mr. Parker. "Why, for her, of course! There's no two ways about it, Shifty—you'll have to part. Now, that there cousin of mine, if he'd ha' listened to me, he'd ha' come off far better nor he did. His little affair, Shifty, could ha' been squared at one time for five-and-twenty pounds—cash—but he was that pig-headed that he let it go on, and it cost him two hundred odd. And he was a single man—and you're a

wed man, which makes it all the worse. If you takes the advice of a true friend, Shifty, you'll let me square it. She's sent up to Briddle for the lawyer, and as safe as houses, if we don't come to terms, he'll serve you with a writ. So there!"

Mr. Skinner groaned heavily.

"Bill!" he said. "How much do you think would square it? Would—would ten pound do it, Bill?"

"No, it wouldn't!" answered Mr. Parker. "And nothin' like. She'd turn up her nose at that. Now, how much have you got, Shifty? I know you've money about you—ain't you, now?"

"I have a little matter, Bill, what I was savin'," replied Mr. Skinner mournfully. "I didn't want nobody to know about it, not even my missis; she has an unnat'ral habit o' keeping me short if I part with everything to her. A very little matter it is, Bill."

"How much?" asked Mr. Parker tersely.

"It's—it's five-and-twenty pound, Bill," faltered Mr. Skinner.

Mr. Parker became very thoughtful.

"Well," he said, "I don't think she'll take it, but I'll try her. Is it in notes, Shifty?"

"It's in gold, Bill," groaned Mr. Skinner—"sov'rins."

"Well," said Mr. Parker. "shiners has their effect, you know, Shifty; she may come round when she actually sees the money. Now, I said I'd step round again and meet the lawyer, so I'll just put my best clothes on, to be more respectable-like, while you gets the money ready. And, of course, if she won't take it, well, I shall ha' done my utmost for you, shan't I? After all, you got yerself into this hole, didn't you, Shifty?"

Half an hour later Mr. Parker, in his best suit, walked

away from the *Daniel Peters* with a canvas bag in his pocket which contained Mr. Skinner's money. He took the direction of the Commodore and Capstan, and Mr. Skinner, watching him go, prayed fervently that he might succeed in pacifying the jilted lady, and wondered what would happen if he failed to do so. He waited and waited for his agent's reappearance, but at the end of two hours Mr. Parker was still away negotiating, and Mr. Skinner fell asleep.

It was about the end of the afternoon that the skipper of the *Daniel Peters*, smoking a cigar on the deck of his vessel, was aware of the presence of Mrs. Geach, who came over the gangway smiling pleasantly. The skipper raised his cap.

"Good-afternoon, ma'am," said he. "What might I have the pleasure of doing for you, ma'am?"

"Good-afternoon," said Mrs. Geach. "I want to see that man of yours that was in my place this morning—a tall, loosish-built man, with a cast in his left eye. I don't know his name."

"That's Parker," said the skipper.

He went forward and bawled Parker's name down the hatch. Conky Tom replied that Parker had gone ashore.

"Don't seem to be in the way at present, ma'am," said the skipper politely. "Could I be of service, now?"

"Oh, it's nothing much," replied Mrs. Geach. "But he told me this morning that some of you was getting up a subscription to buy a gravestone for poor Corny Skinner, and me and my husband concluded to give five shillings, so I just stepped across with it."

The skipper drew back as Mrs. Geach held out two half-crowns. His eyes bulged, his cheeks grew red, and he began to breathe heavily.

"Did—did that there Parker say as how Shifty Skin-

ner was—dead?" he asked huskily. "Did he, ma'am, did he?"

Mrs. Geach stared.

"Why, he couldn't have a gravestone if he wasn't dead, could he, now?" she answered. "Of course, he said he was dead—died more than a year ago."

The skipper smote his forehead.

"Well, of all the—come this way, ma'am, come this way!" he exclaimed. "Dead, eh? Oh, ah, yes, to be sure! This way, ma'am, if you please."

Mrs. Geach obediently followed the skipper to a subterranean region. Her guide threw open a door, and revealed Mr. Skinner sitting up in his bunk busily engaged in eating canned lobster. And Mrs. Geach screamed, and Mr. Skinner groaned, and the skipper laughed sardonically.

"Cornelius!" exclaimed Mrs. Geach. "Aren't you dead?"

Mr. Skinner lifted sulky eyes.

"Not yet I ain't," he answered. "But I'm very ill, and not to be worrited by nobody. I can't stand it."

Mrs. Geach turned on the skipper.

"Well, that there man of yours is a story teller!" she said. "Why, he told me this morning that Skinner there died in his arms, at a place called Port Madoc, more than a year since, and that——"

"He's a liar!" vociferated Mr. Skinner, casting his can of lobster aside and clutching at his coverings. "He —where is he? Ain't you seen him this afternoon, Vashti?"

"I haven't seen him since morning," answered Mrs. Geach. "And after——"

But Mrs. Geach got no further, for with a furious howl Mr. Skinner, who, it appeared, had been resting

almost fully clothed, leaped out of his bunk, darted up the stairway, and, crossing the gangway at a bound, made off like a mad dog in the direction of Briddle town and the railway station. And as he ran he alternately cursed and wept and shouted incoherently, and he was nearly raving when he dashed on to the platform and into the station master's arms.

"Left here a couple of hours ago," said the station master, when he had calmed Mr. Skinner. "And booked for Beovil, where he could, of course, re-book for any place he fancied. There's two lines at Beovil—he could pick and choose there."

Mr. Skinner returned to the *Daniel Peters* little better than a lunatic. And he was not improved by a letter (bearing the Liverpool postmark) which he received a few days later, to the following effect:

DEAR SHIFTY,

You said as how that there Port Briddle was a difficult place to get into and to get out of. But I didn't find no difficulty about getting out of it.

Yours truly,
BILL.

VI

THE COWHIDE BAG

CHUBLEY was one of those unfortunate persons whose looks are against them. His appearance belied his character. He was a living contradiction of all the theories of the psychologists, physiologists, and phrenologists. There was a certain meanness of exterior about him, coupled with a furtive and apologetic air, which did him no good. He was unlucky in several ways. Nature had given him a very commonplace face, a snub nose, a mouth much too wide, large ears, and sandy, nondescript hair. The only decent feature he possessed was his eyes; they were the eyes of a spaniel—shy, faithful, trusting, with a queer, pathetic appeal in their depths. But ineradicable nervousness made him seem furtive; it was only by the most tremendous effort that Chubley—whose Christian name was Thomas Henry—could force himself to look steadily at shop people, especially if they were smart young women, and if he did look, he blushed all over his freckled face. Then, again, he was a bad hand with his clothes; somehow, they never seemed to fit, and his choice of pattern and style was not good. He wore a bowler hat with a Norfolk jacket, and a straw with a morning coat; when he purchased neckwear he invariably got hold of the wrong colours; and if he sported a self-tied sailor's knot, the important part of it had twisted round under one or the other of his too-large ears before he got down to breakfast. It

was all very painful, this, and it had a wearing effect on Chubley.

Yet, as things go in this world, Chubley was a very lucky young man. His father, Samuel Chubley, deceased, was the inventor and patentee of Chubley's Cough Cure, and his son had entered upon the fruition of his labours. At the age of twenty-one Thomas Henry Chubley found himself in full and unrestricted possession of many covetable things. He was the owner of the eminently desirable freehold property known as Balsamum Lodge, situate in the little Midland town of Carborough; of stocks and shares which brought him in two thousand a year; and of a holding in the limited liability company to which Samuel had sold the Cough Cure that produced at least another fifteen hundred every twelve months, regularly. Chubley, indeed, was about the wealthiest man in his town, and ought to have married its most eligible young woman and done things—gone into public life, got himself made mayor, and so on. But at twenty-three he had done nothing—he had not even taken to drink. Truly, things were against him. His mother was dead; he had no brothers, no sisters; as far as he was aware (the Chubley pedigree having been faultily kept, or not kept at all), he had neither aunts nor cousins. He was too shy to join the Carborough Club, too retiring to make friends; nobody called upon him except the clergy and ministers of many denominations, and they only when they wanted a check out of Chubley's fat book. Altogether, when he was at home, Chubley was more or less of a hermit, despite the fact that he had a housekeeper and three women servants under his roof. His one pastime was to smoke his pipe and read novels. He bought nearly all the novels as they came out; Balsamum Lodge was full of them. In course

of time Chubley came to hate all professional novelists with a deep and deadly hatred; he knew every trick of their trade, and regarded them as the biggest humbugs unhung. But by that time they held him in thrall, and the first thing that Chubley did after reading the *Times* every morning was to make out a list of all the new novels advertised therein and send it off to the local bookseller with an order for their immediate supply. He spent an enormous proportion of his income in this way, and sometimes he used to sit in his library at night and stare helplessly at the rows and rows and rows of fiction, and wonder how on earth it was that the things which happened to heroes and heroines never happened to him.

But Chubley was not always at home. He spent a good deal of his time in travelling—if you could call that travelling which really meant visiting the conventional and commonplace British watering places. Now and then he would make up his mind to face a world of which he was secretly afraid, would hesitatingly decide between Blackpool or Scarborough, Llandudno or Skegness, pack his portmanteaux, and depart. He got no great pleasure out of these jaunts. Having never known what it was to want money in his life, he always repaired, in all simplicity, to the best hotels, and in their palatial splendours he moved about like a quiet little mouse. He never spoke to anybody, and nobody spoke to him. He mooned in solitude by the shore, and instead of frequenting the smoking rooms at night, sat in his bedroom reading more novels. When he had had enough of this sort of thing, he went home, and did all the usual things all over again.

It occurred to Chubley one fine spring day that so far he had never visited Brighton—a place of which he had

often read; it was occasionally mentioned in the novels. He forthwith determined to go there, and he spent the rest of the day in consulting a Bradshaw and packing up his ill-fitting but expensive garments. Next morning, in company with two large suitcases and a cowhide bag, he departed, and in due time arrived at St. Pancras, whence he drove across London to Victoria. There he put himself and his cowhide bag into a first-class compartment, which, by the time of departure, was shared by three other passengers—an old gentleman, a middle-aged one, and another man, who was neither old nor middle-aged, and looked like a well-to-do, smartly dressed tradesman. All these men carried into the compartment impedimenta in the shape of bags or valises, and all dumped them into the vacant seats in the middle. And if Chubley had been as observant as he was simple, he would soon have seen that among these things there was another cowhide bag, the exact counterpart of his own, and doubtless made by the very same maker. But he saw nothing. Ere long, however, he felt something. Near Wivelsfield the train, untrue to the irreproachable character of that estimable system, gave a most tremendous lurch; Chubley was banged against his corner, and the bags fell pell-mell upon the floor. Then, after the fashion of properly bred Englishmen, the four travellers glared at each other in silence, picked up and resettled their belongings, and the train, as if repentant, moved on more smoothly than before. Presently it ran into Brighton, and Chubley, possessing himself of his cowhide bag and getting his suitcases from the van, chartered a cab and drove to the Hotel Superbo—after his usual simple-minded fashion of selecting the most costly establishment in the town.

It was dinner-time when Chubley reached this place

of luxury and got installed in his room, and, being hungry, he determined to go down in his travelling suit and sneak into the quietest corner he could find. He washed his hands and face, and opened the cowhide bag in the search for a brush and comb which he always carried there. And on the instant he made a discovery—this was not his bag! Certainly it contained a brush and a comb, a pair of pajamas and another of socks, a clean collar or two, some handkerchiefs, and other small matters, but they were not his. And there was a newspaper and a magazine, and beneath these something of an old and suspicious nature—a sort of parcel of heavy articles done up in a silk neckerchief of bright colours. Out of sheer curiosity Chubley undid these things, and presently found himself staring at what he felt certain, from his deep knowledge of sensational novels, to be a set of clever and highly finished burglar's tools.

If Chubley had been a burglar, caught red-handed in the exercise of his profession, without chance of escape or explanation, he could scarcely have been more taken aback. Indeed, he lost his head—which is what a burglar would not have done. He saw now what had happened. The bag, just like his own, belonged to one of the three men who had travelled with him—he thought, to the round-faced, well-to-do tradesman-like fellow. He, of course, was a professional burglar; he had come down to Brighton to do something. These were his tools—here in his, Chubley's, room! Supposing they were found there? Supposing—— But within five minutes he had supposed fifty things, each more horrible than the last. One thing, however, was clear—he must rid himself of that cowhide bag. Never mind his own!—that he could easily replace. But this—no, not for worlds must he sleep until he had freed himself of it. Hastily unlocking

one of his portly suitcases, he bundled its contents out on the floor, put the cowhide bag and its dreadful secrets within, and relocking the suitcase, went, sore-distressed, to get his dinner.

The waiter who took Chubley in hand thought him a queer chap to be there at all. Chubley was not only ill at ease but in a desperate hurry. He got through that elaborate dinner in double-quick time, by declining this and wolfing that, and when other folk were just settling down to things he was through with them. The fact was that Chubley, with his first mouthful of soup, had got a brilliant inspiration. As he drove up to the Superbo he noticed the entrance to a pier immediately in front of it. Good!—he would get that infernal cowhide bag, walk along the pier, and drop bag and burglar's tools into the sea. And so, making an undignified exit from the crowded dining salon, he went back to his room and got the thing that frightened him—and at that moment his troubles took serious shape.

Perhaps because the various millionaires, profiteers, and other curiosities were at dinner, and their apartments unguarded, there was a quiet but powerfully built person strolling about the corridor in which Chubley's apartment was situated. He saw Chubley, and he thought Chubley's appearance not at all what it ought to be. He saw him enter Number 1061; after a while he saw him open the door, peep out, look cautiously about him, and then, carrying a bag, dart across the corridor and go down a side staircase instead of using the elevator. At that the watchful one followed; when he reached the hall Chubley was descending the steps outside. Thence he sped across the road, and the other man sped after him.

You had to pay twopence before you could go on that

pier, and Chubley was searching his pocket for money when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He jumped, nervous as a cat, and, repressing a gasp of fear, looked round and up at a big, grim-faced man, who regarded him with as much disfavour as suspicion.

"Where are you going with that bag?" demanded this person. "Come, now?"

Chubley began to stammer. He glanced from left to right. The official to whom he had been about to pay twopence looked at him—steadily. So, too, did the other unpleasant person. Strange that these very nasty men could regard him with such fixed, concentrated eyes, while he dare not look at either!

"I—I—I assure you——" he began. "I—this——"

"This, in my opinion, is a fair cop!" said the man from the hotel derisively. "I've followed you, me lad! You took that bag from a bedroom in the Superbo just now. And you'll come right back there. Come on!"

"But—but—I'm staying at the Superbo!" ejaculated Chubley. "That's my room——"

He paused—for both men laughed. Their laughter signified contempt.

"Looks the sort as we gets at the Superbo, don't he, Jim?" said the hotel man. "Yah! you come along o' me, my hearty! Or shall I carry yer? Hop it, now! I'm a-going to take you to the manager."

Chubley felt meaner than ever when he was presently ushered into the presence of a very grand gentleman in evening dress, who sat in a luxuriously appointed business room, and whose manners combined the perfection of politeness with the quintessence of judicial impartiality. He had a secretary with him, and they and the man who had taken Chubley into keeping stared very much when, the contents of the bag being turned out,

the burglar's tools lay shining on the table. The eyes turned on Chubley became stern and questioning, and Chubley himself felt miserably guilty—and utterly inadequate. He knew from the novels what he ought to do, but he couldn't do it. His eyes grew more furtive; his shyness increased; he began to stammer—and made things worse.

"I think you must at least say how these things came into your possession, and what you were going to do with them," said the manager. "On the face of it——"

But just then the door opened and a clerk looked in.

"There's a gentleman here who is asking if anybody has come to the hotel with a cowhide bag which is not his own?" he said, glancing at the thing on the table. "Taken by mistake from——"

Chubley gave a cry of joy as the round-faced man entered the room and nodded affably to him. The manager stared at the newcomer in surprise, and pointed to the shining things before them.

"Are these—the purpose of which is obvious!—yours, sir?" he asked.

"In my custody!" said the other promptly. "My card, sir—Detective Sergeant Pilkinson, of New Scotland Yard. These things, sir, belong to a noted cracksman who's going to be tried at Lewes Assizes to-morrow morning, and I brought 'em down to exhibit in evidence against him. I think this young gentleman took my bag by mistake—we travelled in the same carriage from Victoria—and I took his. Yours is outside in the hall, sir," he concluded, turning to Chubley. "I've been searching for you all over the place. Hope you've had no inconvenience, sir?"

"Oh, it's no matter, no matter at all, thank you," said Chubley. "I——"

"Deeply sorry for the mistake, Mr. Chubley," the manager hastened to say. "You will readily understand——"

"Oh, I understand!" replied Chubley. "I—I suppose I may go now?"

He took his own bag and went to his room, upset and sorrowful. There he flung himself into an armchair, stuck his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, and shed a tear or two. Somehow he felt crushed and helpless. Suddenly the door opened without warning, and he looked up and saw a pretty chambermaid staring at him, astonished and sympathetic.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir," she exclaimed. "I didn't know you were in! I thought—but I hope you are not ill, sir. Can I do anything?"

Chubley, in his turn, stared at her. It was the first time in his life he had ever stared at anybody.

"Yes," he said, suddenly daring. "You can listen to me. What do you think of this, now?" And, as she stood there, holding the door in her hand, he told her all his late adventure. "I'll tell you what I think," he concluded, desperately, "I ought to go into a home for lost dogs, or something! That's about it. Here I am, and I can't take care of myself. I'm like a stray cat—kicked about by anybody!"

The pretty chambermaid, who appeared to be about five years older than Chubley, glanced out of the room, and then came a little nearer to him.

"I understand perfectly!" she whispered. "The fact is, I—I am not what I appear to be, and I am as lonely as you are. My father was a distinguished half-pay officer who left a large family and no money. Rather than be a burden on my mother, I decided to earn my own living, and I sought and obtained my present post

in this hotel. I have seen much of life, and I believe, sir, I could give you a lot of good advice about—about sticking up for yourself."

"Do, do!" answered Chubley, imploringly. "I'd be no end obliged to you!"

The pretty chambermaid looked down demurely.

"To-morrow, sir," she murmured, in a voice as pretty and soothing as her face, "I shall have my afternoon and evening out. If you would be so kind as to meet me at three o'clock, sir, at—shall we say the entrance to the aquarium?"

Chubley stayed two months at the Superbo. Every day he waxed bolder and bolder; he even took to bullying the waiters. Eventually, on the last morning of his stay, he married the pretty chambermaid, and went to Paris for a honeymoon. When they returned to Balsamum Lodge he gave all the novels to the workhouse library, and began to fill his shelves with political history and blue-books. Mrs. Chubley has decided that his proper place is in the House of Commons.

VII

THE BOND STREET SWEET SHOP

Mr. Ronald Wharton was one of those young men about town who live in hotels. A bachelor of twenty-three, the possessor of considerable wealth and infinite leisure, he had tried other modes of existence—lodgings in the vicinity of St. James's, one of the smaller houses in the Albany, a flat in Berkeley Square. All these had their advantages, and their drawbacks; eventually Mr. Wharton, weary of the loneliness which sometimes came over him—for as much as half an hour—in his last experiment, the flat, flung himself into a suite of rooms in the Hotel Marisco, a palatial establishment recently erected in Mayfair, and announced to all his acquaintances that he had come to anchor. This suited him; in addition to his own man, a faithful being named Tarver who had waited hand and foot on him ever since his twenty-first birthday—quite an age, in the opinion of both—he had a whole troupe of servants and all the resources of a vast and luxurious house at his command; if he ever got tired of his own household gods in his own apartments he could always open the door and step into new surroundings. And as he spent much money, and was as punctilious as a well-to-do maiden lady about paying his bills every Saturday morning, Mr. Wharton was in high favour at the Marisco, and you might have thought that the whole place belonged to him.

It was Mr. Wharton's custom to trifle with his break-

fast in his own cosy sitting room about ten o'clock of a morning, and before he had fully decided upon which of his many suits he would wear until lunch-time came round. And on a somewhat gray November morning he was thus engaged, his slim and trim form enveloped in a dressing gown and his slippered feet toasting at a cheery fire, when Tarver appeared and silently laid a buff envelope before his master. Knowing that master's habits, Tarver just as silently went away. Mr. Wharton would open that telegram when it so pleased him, and not before. And as Mr. Wharton was at that moment deeply engaged in reading a graphic account of a really Homeric encounter between Young Alf of Bermondsey and Kid Jukis of Wapping in a sporting paper, and could not tear himself from it, some moments elapsed before he deigned to look at what it was that his servant had laid beside the toast rack. He yawned as he picked up and opened the buff envelope—but his mouth remained open as his eyes read the message which it contained:

Please come to see me at once serious business. PETER.

Now Peter was not a younger brother who had got into a mess at his school, nor a friend who suddenly needed a helping hand—Peter, in real fact, was the pet name of Miss Petrilla Pemberley, a gay and lively young lady well known to frequenters of the Liantheum Theatre as the prettiest girl that had ever been presented in any of its famous revues. She and Mr. Wharton were great friends, and had practically no secrets from each other; they were, indeed, fond of telling each other, for amusement, such secrets as they ever had, which were chiefly of the sort that one would naturally associate

with human butterflies. And what made Mr. Wharton open his mouth was to see Miss Pemberley's soubriquet attached to the last two words of her message. Peter and serious business seemed to him to be as far removed from each other as Brixton is from Ballarat.

But there it was, and it dragged, or rather threw, Mr. Wharton from his chair and his lazy breakfast. To summon Tarver, to jump into some clothes, to hurry into overcoat, hat, gloves, and the rest of it, to dart streetward and fall into the first taxicab was the work of a few minutes. Before half-past ten Mr. Wharton was whirling up Regent Street on his way to Langham Place, where Miss Pemberley occupied an expensive flat. Unaccustomed to haste, he was almost spent and nearly breathless when, duly admitted by an obviously surprised maid, he rushed into his dear friend's cosy parlour and found her, attired for outdoor exercise, standing by a centre table, whereon, amid its brown paper wrappings, lay one of those fancy boxes in which high-class confectioners pack their wares. The lid of this was thrown open, but over the contents lay a sheet of silvery paper, with which Miss Pemberley's slim fingers were toying when her visitor tumbled in upon her.

"Wh—what's the matter?" demanded Mr. Wharton. "What on earth——"

"This is the matter," said Miss Pemberley. "This box of chocolate. You sent it, didn't you, Ronnie? I know you did."

"I—I—yes, to be sure I sent it!" admitted Mr. Wharton, mopping his brow. "But—is the infernal stuff poisoned, or what? Of course I sent it!"

"Yes," remarked Miss Pemberley. "Very nice of you, too, old thing— But look here—you didn't send—that!"

She suddenly swept aside the layer of silvery paper,

and, lying in the midst of the big lumps of sweetstuff, were revealed something that shot forth what seemed to be sparks of living fire. Mr. Wharton gasped and recoiled.

"Good Lord!" he said. "Diamonds!"

"Diamond necklace," asserted Miss Pemberley. "Worth, I think, no end! Would it were mine!—but it isn't, worst luck! Now, Ronnie, how came it there—in that box?"

Mr. Wharton did a little more mopping, and, still clinging to his handkerchief, subsided into the nearest chair. He gazed feebly at Miss Pemberley and at the chocolate box.

"This," he remarked, "is a licker! I don't know anything about any diamond necklace. All I know is this. I was strolling along Bond Street yesterday afternoon, latish, when I happened to look into that new sweetstuff shop they've got there now. I noticed some rather fetching-looking chocolates there and thought you'd like some, so I went in and told the folks to send you a box—wrote your address down on a label, picked out the box, paid the money and porterage, and walked out. That's all I know."

"Did you see the box—open, I mean?" asked Miss Pemberley.

"Well, I just did, I suppose—just glanced at it, no doubt," admitted Mr. Wharton. "All pretty much alike, those sort of things—lots of 'em on the counter."

"But they hadn't all got diamond necklaces in them, I'll be bound!" asserted Miss Pemberley. "Now look here, Ronnie, my son, you've got to brush up your memory. Was there anybody else in that shop when you were?—customers, I mean."

"Oh!—ah!—yes, I think so," replied Mr. Wharton.

"Sort of place where you can get tea and coffee and buns, don't you know. Yes, I think there were people—women—sitting somewhere down the shop—sort of alcoves, you know; regular bun-shop style. But I didn't look at 'em particularly."

"Was there anybody at the counter on the same errand as yourself?" asked Miss Pemberley, with the persistence of a cross-examining counsel. "Come, now—think!"

Mr. Wharton gazed at the hearthrug and rubbed his chin. Reflection was not his strong point. But suddenly he lifted a brightening face.

"By Jove, there was!" he exclaimed. "I remember now. Shouldn't have, though, if you hadn't put me up to it. Yes—a lady! Elderly party—fur coat down to her heels, bunch of violets on her—remember the violets very well. Bit early, you know—hadn't noticed any knocking about before."

"What was she doing?" inquired Miss Pemberley. "Come on, now, Ronnie—rub your brains on something!"

"All right!" retorted Mr. Wharton. "I can get at things if I'm left alone! Of course, yes, she was sending a parcel, too. Now I come to think of it, she was writing a label when I went in, at a little table in one of those alcoves. She—yes, she came forward with label and parcel—no, a box, just like mine—and shoved 'em across the counter and asked the girl to make it up and send it off. You see, I can remember when I try."

"Brilliant effort!" said Miss Pemberley. "Was that the same girl who took your order?"

"Er—yes," assented Mr. Wharton. "Only was one girl. Jolly good figure she had—and dark eyes. Know her again anywhere."

"No doubt!" remarked Miss Pemberley. "I hope you'll as easily recognise the elderly lady with the fur coat and the early violets. However——" she paused to press an electric bell. A maid appeared. "Mabel," said Miss Pemberley, "get a taxi—at once."

Mr. Wharton looked up.

"What now?" he asked. "Going somewhere?"

"Somewhere!" said Miss Pemberley, scornfully. "We're going to the police, you ass! Where else? That necklace has been stolen! Come on, now."

Mr. Wharton allowed himself to be put in the cab, and he sat, silent and reflective, by Miss Pemberley's side until they were crossing Trafalgar Square. Then he suddenly spoke.

"I say!" he said.

"Say it!" commanded Miss Pemberley, who was nursing the fateful parcel and its remarkable contents. "Get along!"

"If that—that party with the violets had stolen those diamonds, what did she put 'em in a box of sweetstuff for?" asked Mr. Wharton. "Odd, isn't it?"

"Not to me!" said Miss Pemberley. "She wanted to get rid of them as quickly as possible. Didn't want them to be found on her in case somebody laid hands on her when she went out into Bond Street. Good notion! As soon as she'd stolen them she went and bought a box of chocolates, shoved the loot inside, wrote out a label to some convenient address—and has, of course, gone there this morning to take up her booty. Wish I'd been there to see her face, too, when she found she'd got the wrong box!"

"Good business!" remarked Mr. Wharton. He laughed, as if in pure enjoyment. "You're a clever young thing, Peter," he added. "Never have thought of that

myself; fancied it was some queer mistake. Very clever of you."

"I've got some sense put away somewhere," admitted Miss Pemberley. "And look here, Ronnie, when we get to New Scotland Yard, just you let me do all the talking—at first, anyway. You can come in later, when it gets to details. But I'm a good hand at lucid explanation, see? Let me open things."

"Oh, I don't care," asserted Mr. Wharton. "Bit puzzled still, if you want to know. You jaw at them as much as you want. I'll listen."

The keen-eyed Important Personage in whose presence Miss Pemberley and Mr. Wharton eventually found themselves listened to Miss Pemberley's able and lucid exposition with close and undisguised interest. It was with great interest, too, that he examined the diamond necklace and the box of sweets in which it had been enclosed, and the label on the outer wrapping. But his attention then switched off to his visitors; within five minutes he knew as much about both as if he had been lady's maid to one or valet to the other. And, knowing so much, he became surprisingly affable and confidential.

"Well," he said with a laugh, as his fingers toyed carelessly with the necklace, "I'll tell you two young people something. We have already been informed of the theft of this thing. It was stolen yesterday afternoon—at least, it was missed yesterday afternoon. From our information, it was probably stolen between two o'clock and half-past three."

"From whom?" asked Miss Pemberley, with true feminine eagerness.

The Important Personage looked still more confidential.

"There are at present staying at Marridge's Hotel," he said—"which is, as you both know, one of the most exclusive establishments of its sort in London—a Colonel Fulke-Browne and his wife. They are staying there until they can get a suitable town house. Colonel Fulke-Browne has recently returned from India; his wife preceded his return by twelve months. She is pretty well known in society, and I have heard that she is a devotee of bridge. She is also somewhat famous on account of her diamonds, of which this little bauble forms an important part. Now, yesterday afternoon Mrs. Fulke-Browne saw this necklace in her jewel case at two o'clock, when she placed the case in a drawer in her bedroom before going to lunch. At half-past three, when she returned to the room, the drawer and the jewel case had been broken open, and the necklace was gone! Colonel Fulke-Browne was out, and he did not return until evening, when, having learned of his wife's loss, he telephoned to us. We sent a man up and ascertained the facts I have just made you acquainted with; we also learned that the necklace is heavily insured against theft. Colonel Fulke-Browne and his wife are coming here this morning; so, too, is a representative of the insurance company, which was, of course, immediately notified of the loss. And here is the necklace!"

"I see how it's all been!" exclaimed Miss Pemberley. "The woman who stole it wanted to get rid of the loot as quickly as possible—these smart thieves always do, don't they?—and so she rushed to that sweet shop, which is close by Marridge's, bought a box of chocolate, stuck the necklace into it, and had it posted to herself at some address or other. And the shop girl mixed the parcels and the labels! Clear as noonday!"

The Important Personage smiled.

"You're a very clever young lady!" he said. "When you're tired of the Liantheum, Miss Pemberley, come to me and I'll find you a job. But who is the lady? I suppose Mr. Wharton can identify her if he gets the chance?"

"Oh, I'll identify her right enough!" asserted Mr. Wharton, who had listened open-mouthed to these interesting details. "Pick her out of a dozen, now that I know all about it!"

"Noticeable woman?" suggested the Important Personage.

"Thousand-guinea fur coat, I should say," replied Mr. Wharton laconically. "And you don't buy real violets for nothing this time of the year, either."

"You're nearly as sharp as Miss Pemberley," said the Important Personage pleasantly. "Well, the gift of observation is a great one, my young friends, and one ought to cultivate it, too."

At that moment the door opened, and an official, throwing it wide, announced loudly, "Colonel and Mrs. Fulke-Browne, sir!"

The Important Personage rose; so, too, did Mr. Wharton. A tall, bronzed, white-whiskered man, very consequential and forceful of manner, strode in, followed by a lady who was chiefly enveloped in Russian sable, and who wore a bunch of violets at her breast. She looked round as if in wonder at her surroundings, and her eyes encountered those of Mr. Wharton. And thereat, stopping short as if an arresting hand had been laid upon her, she let out a faint but unmistakable scream.

"Oh, lord!" muttered Mr. Wharton. "Here's a nice mess!"

But nobody but Miss Pemberley heard him. Quick as

thought, the Important Personage caught up something which he had just concealed on his blotting pad and, carrying it in his hand, swept Colonel and Mrs. Fulke-Browne into an inner room. Mr. Wharton and Miss Pemberley, left alone, stared at each other. After thus staring for quite two minutes, they gradually drew together, and Miss Pemberley tapped Mr. Wharton's arm, at the same time nodding her head toward the closed door. Then they both forgot their grammar.

"Ronnie!" whispered Miss Pemberley. "Is—is that—her?"

"That's her!" said Mr. Wharton. "And," he added, almost malevolently, "I reckon that police chap isn't half putting her through it? Stole her own stuff—what? Whew!"

Then, as if fascinated, they resumed their watch on the tightly shut door.

VIII

THE DOUBLE DEAL

Pryke, grocer and chandler, whose establishment occupied what he himself considered to be a highly advantageous corner position in the Harrow Road, was not, outside his own particular concerns, a keenly observant man. Had he been so he would have noticed that on a certain summer morning when everything, even in that dismal quarter of the town, was gay with life and sunshine, his two assistants, Mr. George Fulcher and Mr. Herbert Tubbs, were what vulgar people would call off colour. Each looked unusually thoughtful; one was decidedly downcast and melancholy; both were plainly preoccupied. If Pryke had given more attention to their doings he could not have failed to see that each made mistakes all through the morning. Mr. Fulcher got mixed in the weighing out of things; once he gave a woman tallow candles instead of candied peel; more than once when making out a bill he became lost in thought, stared abstractedly at nothing, and sighed deeply. Mr. Tubbs twice made serious mistakes in his invoices and had to be secretly admonished by the cash girl; he, too, served customers absent-mindedly, and if Pryke had been much about, Mr. Tubbs would have heard Pryke's tongue. But Pryke was chiefly occupied with his account books and with the travellers from wholesale houses that morning, and he noticed

nothing, not even that Mr. Fulcher and Mr. Tubbs, regarded in the shop and its purlieus as bosom friends, never spoke to or looked at each other. Only the cash girl and the shop boy noticed that; the cash girl wondered, and the shop boy opined that the two gentlemen had been having words.

At noon Mr. Fulcher and Mr. Tubbs, in accordance with the custom of the establishment, had the shop to themselves. Pryke, the cash girl, and the shop boy had gone to dinner, and customers, instead of coming in dribbles, came in drops, few and far between. A deep silence fell over the place. It was broken at last by Mr. Tubbs, who, thrusting a knife desperately into a big lump of cheap butter which he had been about to dissect, turned a countenance of fierce resolution on the gloomy Mr. Fulcher.

"George!" he exclaimed. "George! this here can't go on, George! If anybody'd ha' told me as how a whole morning could pass away at Pryke's without friendly communication between you and me, George, I—I—well, I wouldn't ha' believed 'em!"

Mr. Fulcher sighed deeply.

"Same here!" he consented to say. "Same here, Bert. "But," his tone became affectingly virtuous, "it ain't my fault, Bert! You ain't a bad-hearted feller, Bert—but you must see for yourself that things isn't what they was! No, and never can be!" he added mournfully. "I'm a broken-hearted man, Bert!"

"Well, and that ain't my fault, George," responded Mr. Tubbs, as penitently as if he were acknowledging sore transgressions. "S'far as I can see, 'tain't nobody's fault, old man! Since it has come about—you won't mind me touching a tender spot, old man?—since it has come about that Maisie prefers me to you—you

know what young ladies are, old man!—why, I can't help it, can I? I asks yer now, George, can I?"

"I ain't never said you could, old man!" replied Mr. Fulcher, sadly. "No, I ain't never said nor thought it. I don't owe you no ill-will, Bert—no!"

"Nor her, neither, I hope, George?" asked Mr. Tubbs anxiously. "I hope not indeed, old man! I says to Maisie last night, when things were fixed up, 'Maisie,' I says, 'now that you really have made up your mind,' I says, 'and it's to be me and not George,' I says, 'I hope, Maisie,' I says, 'as how you'll look upon George as a brother.' That's what I says, George—gospel truth! And I hope, George, that when Maisie and me's married—if you'll excuse me mentioning such a thing, the associations no doubt being painful—I hope, George, as how you'll remember that there'll always be a chair by the humble hearth and a drop o' something in the sideboard! I hope you will, old man!"

But Mr. Fulcher sighed still more profoundly.

"You mean very well, Bert, old man!" he said, "but it can't be! Seems like my life's been cut in two, same as this here cheese—clean cut! There is things, Bert—you'll learn 'em in time, old man—as can't be done; things, I should say, as isn't done. When—she—gives me the bird, I says to myself, 'George, my lad,' I says, 'it's over! Bert is the man and not you. You've got the blooming push, George,' I says. And so I have. Bert, old man, I'm a-going to do it!"

"Do what?" gasped Mr. Tubbs. "Oh, George, you ain't going to do nothing desperate?"

"My time's up with Pryke come this week-end," answered Mr. Fulcher gloomily. "I ain't going to stop on. Three years in this here Harrow Road is enough. I'm off to Canada, Bert, old man. I've money put by—

intended for the little home, Bert!—and I'll draw it out and be off."

"Think twice, George," said Mr. Tubbs feelingly. "Count twenty, old man! The old country, George!—think of that, now! A man o' your talents'll be lost in them foreign parts. And good old London, George—ah!"

"No," exclaimed Mr. Fulcher determinedly. "Don't tempt me, mentioning those things, Bert. The die's cast, as the saying is. I'm off to Liverpool Monday. And I hope you and her'll sometimes give a thought to the poor outcast, Bert, when he's far away!"

Mr. Tubbs wrung his friend's hand. He was only saved from tears by the entrance of a customer. When he had served her and had remarked absent-mindedly, "Beautiful weather, don't it?" at least three times, Pryke returned from his hasty meal, and Mr. Tubbs was free to depart to his. But instead of making direct for the cheap eating house which he patronized, he hastened toward a neighbouring milliner's shop, and at its doorstep encountered Miss Maisie Hickson, who, having been courted severally and collectively by Mr. Tubbs and Mr. Fulcher for the space of two years, had at last—on the previous evening—made up her mind in favour of Mr. Tubbs, and sent Mr. Fulcher to the right-about.

Miss Hickson and Mr. Tubbs joined arms affectionately, and sought a corner in the eating house where they consumed beefsteak pudding and smiled at each other. As the beefsteak pudding came to an end Mr. Tubbs squeezed his sweetheart's arm.

"Maisie," he whispered, "such a do with poor old George this morning! He ain't half taken it to 'art, s'elp me! What yer think he's going to do now, Maisie?"

"Don't know, Bert, and don't care!" replied Miss Hickson. "Ain't none o' my business, see?"

"He's going to emigrate!" announced Mr. Tubbs. "Canada!"

"Let him!" said Miss Hickson scornfully. "Meanest feller ever I went with. If he ran to sixpenn'orth o' chocolate once a month it was about all! If I ever went to the pictures with him I had to pay for my own place. Right down mean, I call him!"

"But you ain't found me like that, Maisie!" suggested Mr. Tubbs. "Have yer now?"

"Ain't nothing to complain of," replied Miss Hickson. "Soon let you know when I have!"

"Well, it's a fact," said Mr. Tubbs, hastily sliding away from unpleasant possibilities. "George is going!"

"Good riddance!" declared Miss Hickson. "Mind he don't borrow something before he goes!—you watch him."

"Oh, I dunno!" observed Mr. Tubbs, kindly. "Ain't a bad feller, poor old George; and isn't he down in the mouth!"

But when he returned to Pryke's and rejoined Mr. Fulcher—who ate his midday repast in the back regions of the shop—Mr. Tubbs noticed that his friend appeared to have regained some of his usual cheerfulness. He was heard to exchange a time-honoured joke or two with established customers during the afternoon, and when closing time arrived his face had become almost smiling, if still chastened. And when he and Mr. Tubbs had seen the shop boy put up the last of the shutters, and had lighted their pipes at the shop door, free till eight o'clock next morning, he slipped a hand into his brother assistant's arm and steered him down the road—away from the milliner's shop.

"You ain't got to meet her for an hour yet, Bert," he said. "Come and do a bitter, old man, at the Old Armchair; it'll be one of the last we shall ever have together, Bert."

Mr. Tubbs allowed himself to be persuaded, and Mr. Fulcher led the way into the quietest corner of an adjacent saloon bar and called for two halves of bitter. He solemnly pledged the future Mrs. Tubbs, and then nudged his friend's elbow.

"Bert, old man," he said confidentially, "you'll be wanting to give her an engagement ring. You mustn't forget that, old man. Proper thing to do. But p'r'aps you done it already?"

"No-o," replied Mr. Tubbs. "But I been thinking about it all day, George, old man. What—what would such a thing run to, now?"

"Depends," answered Mr. Fulcher. "Of course you want to do the thing handsome. And there's this about it, old man, if you lay your money out on a good thing of that sort, well, it's always there, see? Gold don't deteriorate, old man, nor yet diamonds."

"Diamonds!" exclaimed Mr. Tubbs. "Ooh! I say, old man! Diamonds! Come, now, I ain't a Creesus!"

"It's a first-class form of investment, Bert," said Mr. Fulcher. "Diamonds is always worth whatever you give for them. I know! Ain't you never noticed that most of the commercials that comes to Pryke's always wears a good diamond ring? Well, do you know why? Because they know that as long as they've got that on 'em they'll never be short of cash! There is times," continued Mr. Fulcher oracularly, "when you might be stranded in a strange town without the ready—remittance not turned up, and so forth, Bert. Well, if you've got a good diamond ring on you it don't take five minutes to raise a

ten-pound note on it. That's why the commercials always carries one."

"Is that a fact, George?" said Mr. Tubbs. "Really, I'd no idea of it!"

"Fact, old man," answered Mr. Fulcher assuringly. "Diamonds never deteriorates."

"Then you'd recommend diamonds?" asked Mr. Tubbs, nervously.

"If it was me," said Mr. Fulcher, "I should certainly go in for diamonds, 'cause, as I say, your money's always there. And you ain't buying, you're investing."

"What—what might diamonds run to?" inquired Mr. Tubbs once more. "I can't lay out what these here nobs would lay out, you know, George!"

Mr. Fulcher sipped his drink and relapsed into kindly reflection.

"I'll tell you what I'll do for you, Bert," he said suddenly. "Mind you, I wouldn't do it for nobody but you, old man! There's a fellow lodges where I do that's in that trade, and knows all about it. Now, I'll just get him to let me have two or three little specimens o' that sort—on approval, d'ye see?—and I'll show 'em to you. You'll get what you want cheaper that way, 'cause there'll not be the jeweller's profit, old man; he's in the wholesale trade, this fellow. I'll see him to-night and mention it."

Mr. Tubbs thought this an excellent idea, and he treated Mr. Fulcher to another bitter and a cigar in acknowledgment of his kindness. They talked diamonds for the next half hour.

"Take my advice, Bert, old man, and don't mention the ring to her till you've got it," said Mr. Fulcher confidentially on parting. "I'll bring the specimens along

to-morrow night—Friday, that'll be; you give her the selection when you take her out Saturday noon. It's the last thing I can do for both of you, old man."

Mr. Tubbs wrung his friend's hand affectionately for the second time that day, and went off to meet Miss Hickson. He treated her to the pictures that evening, and to ice creams when they came out, and if he thought of Mr. Fulcher at all it was only coupled with a philosophic reflection that after all a choice has to be made in these cases, and if Miss Hickson had chosen him it was more his good luck than his fault. And no doubt George would find a ladylove in Canada.

Next night, in the quiet corner of the Old Armchair, Mr. Fulcher pulled out a small case and revealed to Mr. Tubbs's bulging eyes three rings set with diamonds. One had a single stone, another had two, the third—a massive affair—had three.

"Ooh!" exclaimed Mr. Tubbs. Already he visualized Miss Hickson's delight. "Ooh, George!"

"I've been lucky, Bert, old man," said Mr. Fulcher. "This here fellow that I mentioned, he happened to have these three rings on him. They're the genuine article! Twenty-two carat gold, and the stones, as he calls 'em—trade name, you know—of the first water. Bargains! And cheap. He says you'd have to give double at any jeweller's."

"How—how much are they?" asked Mr. Tubbs, tremblingly.

"This," answered Mr. Fulcher, "is fifteen quid. That's seventeen-ten. And this, with three stones, is twenty-five quid. And look you here, Bert, old man!—I'll let you into a secret. This fellow, he says that if he was buying, the three-stone ring's the article. He says that you could always get your money on it at any time, and

in a few years it'll be worth forty. But it's for you to say, old man. Of course, if it was me, I should never hesitate."

Mr. Tubbs felt as if he were doing something terrible, but he took the plunge. Mr. Fulcher walked with him to his lodgings, where Mr. Tubbs produced certain treasured banknotes from his box, handed them over and received the twenty-five-pound ring.

"And if you ain't got a bargain, Bert, old man," observed Mr. Fulcher, pocketing the money, "then I don't know what a bargain is!"

"You'd have gone in for it yourself, old man?" said Mr. Tubbs, still nervous. "You consider it a good one?"

"I do, indeed—no error!" exclaimed Mr. Fulcher.

Next day at noon Mr. Fulcher, bound for Liverpool on the Monday morning, said farewell to everybody at Pryke's, and half an hour later Mr. Tubbs, in the corner of the little eating house, slipped the twenty-five-pound diamond ring on Miss Hickson's finger. Miss Hickson became speechless with amazement.

"Bert!" she said, when breath was restored to her. "You—you must have given an awful lot for it!"

"Oh, I ain't particular to a pound or two, you know, Maisie," responded Mr. Tubbs loftily. "At least, not where you're concerned. Pretty little thing, ain't it!"

Miss Hickson returned to the milliner's shop in an ecstasy of upliftedness, and Mr. Tubbs went back to Pryke's. Saturday was his busiest day, and he was at Pryke's till ten o'clock. On Sunday morning he lay in bed till nearly noon; after dinner he went to meet his sweetheart at a favourite trysting place. But Miss Hickson never came, though he hung about for hours, and he dare not go to her house, for as yet Hickson *père*, a terrible person, knew nothing. Finally Mr. Tubbs went

home disconsolate, and spent a sleepless night. He was pale and wan with anxiety when he reached the shop next morning, but his paleness turned to a chalky whiteness when the shop boy handed to him a letter, addressed in Maisie's illiterate calligraphy, and obviously containing a ring. True enough, the diamond ring fell out when Mr. Tubbs's trembling fingers tore open the envelope.

He paid no attention to it; his eyes were glued on the letter:

Don't you ever come near me again, you mean toad [wrote Miss Hickson]! You're worth no more than your rubbishy ring, and if I catch sight of your plain face again, just remember that I don't know it.

Mr. Tubbs uttered a sound that made the shop boy drop his last shutter. He seized the ring, fled from the shop, and dashing down the street, darted into a jeweller's shop. Its manager, half awake, stood behind the counter trimming his nails. He knew Mr. Tubbs by sight and nodded to him.

"Hullo!" said he.

Mr. Tubbs slapped the ring before this expert.

"Mr. Aaronson," said Mr. Tubbs, "what—what's the value of that, sir?"

The expert picked up the ring, glanced it over and under, and threw it down again.

"Oh, I dunno!" he answered indifferently. "'Bout five bob, I should think."

"Wh-at!" screamed Mr. Tubbs. "Ain't it gold and diamonds?"

Mr. Aaronson's Hebraic countenance became sardonic.

"Gold and diamonds!" he said with fine scorn. "Brass and glass!"

Mr. Tubbs got himself out of the shop. His thoughts turned to Mr. Fulcher. But Mr. Fulcher was already on the way to Canada.

IX

BEHIND THE MONOCLE

Since it is now the mode for folk to live in houses whereof the walls are fashioned of crystal-clear glass everybody who reads the society papers and the personal paragraphs in what was once the halfpenny press is well aware that the Secretary for Superfluities (one of the many recently created offices the tenancy of which carries Cabinet rank) is an ardent and even besotted devotee of golf. He has frequently been pictured in the illustrated press playing golf with the Prime Minister, or with the Bishop of Millborough, or with Mr. Woking Waye, the eminent comedian; everybody is familiar with these intimate representations of his tall, spare figure, his attenuated shanks, his oldtweed suit, his ascetic face, and with the monocle which is for ever fixed in his right eye—and especially with the monocle. About that monocle there is a tradition in Parliamentary and official circles—it is said that its wearer has never been seen without it, even by his valet. The valet's testimony, indeed, has been referred to in whispers; he alleges that ever since he entered his master's service, some ten or twelve years ago, the Secretary has had that bit of glass in his eye when found in bed of a morning, and is still wearing it when he assumes his pajamas of a night. Certain people of the over-inquisitive persuasion declare that there is a reason for this supplementary aid to nature. The Secretary, they say,

is one of those rare specimens of humanity who are endowed with odd organs of vision; his left eye, they affirm, is gray, while the other, shielded by the monocle, is of a vivid green. But as the Secretary is a confirmed bachelor, and has never had any love affairs in his five-and-forty years of existence, nobody is in a position to say whether this is definitely true or not; the matter remains one of profound speculation. But there is no speculation about the monocle, and it is a well-known fact that when the monocle (an unusually large one of slightly tinted glass) is turned upon anyone, whether a foolishly pertinacious member of Parliament or a permanent official who goes wrong with his decimals or a caddie who coughs at the critical moment, the effect is peculiarly awe-striking, and pretty much the same might be expected if the Sphinx suddenly lifted an eyelid and blasted with a glare of living light some miserable wayfarer of the desert.

The fact is that the Secretary himself is a bit of a Sphinx, a sort of secret man, on occasion. His public life is, to be sure, well known; it has been already narrated that he is often featured in the picture papers. He is famous in Parliament for the cleverness and ingenuity of his speeches; no man of his day knows better how to persuade people to do the things which they ought not to do. He is also known in society as a regular diner-out, a teller of tales with an acid flavour, and as a giver of quiet little dinners to select intellectuals. But all this is done between Mondays and Fridays; between Friday and Monday the Secretary for Superfluities disappears from the public field of vision. He is never seen at any fashionable place of worship, nor found at a country house, and his valet can prove that he is not at home. Not even the valet knows whither he goes on

Friday evening. He suspects golf—and in this he is right. But it is not the golf of the illustrated papers, wherein the Secretary figures with distinguished statesmen, ecclesiastics, and music-hall artistes; that is all part of the public business, and has its uses. Like most other much-occupied men, the Secretary knows the value of privacy and retreat, and he long since found out how to get both. He knows where, in a certain southern county, far out of the beaten track, there is a nice little golf links, and near it an equally nice old country inn of the sort that you only read of in the novels, and it is to these oases in the desert of modernity that he betakes himself at week-ends as often as ever he can, not in his full style and title—which is considerable and impressive when fully set out—but as plain Mr. Mann from London.

When he first lighted upon this Arcadia—accidentally as most of the good things are discovered—the Secretary, as Mr. Mann, arranged his future on those systematic and thorough-going lines which so recommended him to the folk who pushed him into power. He neglected no detail. He took rooms at the little hotel for a year in advance. He ordered its one taxicab to be at Pimpleton Magna railway station every Friday evening at nine o'clock; if he came, he came; if he didn't, he didn't; if he did come, the taxicab was to be ready to carry him away again at seven-thirty sharp on the Monday morning. He paid his subscription at the little golf club, thankful that not a single one of its members knew or recognized him; he rented a locker there and left his kit; he hinted to the secretary—a spinster lady—that he would come down as often as possible; the secretary found by experience that he came four weeks out of five. When she playfully rallied him on his fond-

ness for their out-of-the-way retreat he was mendacious enough to drop a mysterious hint about doctors' orders. He enjoyed his week-ends quietly, and he had but one fear—that somebody should find him out. However, at the end of nine months he had a comfortable reflection—so far, he was the only outsider who had ever played over those links. And no one knew him. Here, at any rate, he was Mr. Mann—a nobody.

On a certain Friday evening in the middle of November Mr. Mann, carrying his usual modest suitcase, stepped out of a local train that had carried him to Pimpleton Magna from the main-line junction twenty miles away, nodded silently to the railway porter and the ticket collector, and walked outside to where the taxi-cab always awaited him. There was but a dim light hanging over the station entrance, but it was strong enough to show Mr. Mann that the driver who held open the door for him was not the person who usually steered him to the hospitable doors and red-curtained windows of the Crying Curlew. He paused, looking sharply at the unfamiliar figure—that of a strongly built broad-shouldered fellow in a chauffeur's overcoat and cap. What was in his mind was this—the road between Pimpleton Magna and the Crying Curlew was a particularly difficult and dangerous one, descending into deep dells and going round sharp corners in dark woods; it needed experience, and Mr. Mann respected his neck.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed abruptly. "Who are you? Where's Pritchard to-night?"

The man carried his hand to his cap in a respectful salute.

"Beg your pardon, sir," he replied, "Pritchard, he's down with the lumbago, sir; can't move himself."

"I hope you know the road well?" suggested Mr.

Mann. He knew the neighbourhood well enough by that time to be aware that the substitute was not a native. "Live hereabouts?"

"Chauffeur to Sir Thomas for five years, sir," answered the driver. "He's just gone abroad, so I'm living in the village till I get another job. I know the road well enough, sir."

"Very good," said Mr. Mann, and stepped into the cab. "But mind the corners."

He sank back, folded his rug over his knees, and was carried away past the dim lights in the cottage windows. It was his habit to close his eyes and take a comfortable snooze during this seven-mile drive between station and hotel, and he did so now, and quickly fell into a light doze. But he was conscious all through his superficial slumber that he was being borne along at a much swifter rate than usual; conscious, too, that the taxicab ran more smoothly than it generally did. And he finally woke to his full senses, and realized that things were not what they ought to be. By that time he knew every yard of the road from Pimpleton Magna to the Crying Curlew—and he knew that he was off it. Hereabouts they should have turned a peculiarly sharp corner and descended into Fairy Hill Bottom—and they hadn't. He threw up the window and poked his head into a very black night.

"You're on the wrong road!" he shouted irascibly. "You should have turned——"

The driver shouted back, without stopping or decreasing his pace, "Tree down and across the road the other way, sir!" he called. "Got to go round."

Mr. Mann closed the window and sank back in his seat once more. The cab flew on; it seemed to be on a straight, level road now, one quite unfamiliar to him,

judging by its surface, and its driver increased its pace to one which was certainly above the speed limit. And at that Mr. Mann once again leaned out and shouted. But this time he got no answer, except that the man at whose mercy he had placed himself drove ahead faster than before. Mr. Mann got a glimpse of the road along which they were careering; the headlights showed him a straight, well-kept road, evidently a highway, bordered by great trees, the first fringe of the border of a wood. It was all unfamiliar to him.

Once more he sank back in his seat, this time to think very seriously. There was no doubt about things now; he was being run away with—kidnapped! There would be a development presently—he would find himself in the presence of somebody who wanted him. But did that somebody want Mr. Mann or the Cabinet Minister? It did not require much reflection to enable him to settle that question. And suddenly, in the darkness of the cab, he slipped his hand into an inner pocket of his clothing, feeling for something. . . .

Ten minutes later, after various twistings to the right and turnings to the left, the cab came to a dead stop, and with a calmness that would have done credit to a statue of resignation and an expression even more inscrutable than that which his features usually assumed as he dropped into his place on the front bench, its occupant quietly opened the door and stepped out—to find himself in the presence of three men, each of whom wore a mask of black velvet across face and eyes. The captive looked them over in the glow of the lamps—big men all, and well dressed. And in the right hand of the biggest and nearest was a revolver.

For a moment a strange and curious silence fell on all of them—it was broken by the sharp cry of an owl in the

adjoining wood. Somehow that sound broke the ice among the human beings. But it was the ambushed man who spoke, and as he spoke he so placed himself that the light fell full on his face, and especially on the monocle in his right eye. Something in that bit of glass and in the lines of the thin-lipped mouth beneath the well-arched nose suggested cold contempt. And the tones of the captive's voice were cold enough.

"Well," he said. "And what now?"

None of the three men seemed particularly disposed to speak; there was obvious hesitation. And at that the man who faced them laughed—and in such a fashion that the holder of the revolver started.

"Just so!" said the captive, sneeringly. "You were about to say——?"

Words then came—quickly, and not without a suspicion of nervousness.

"What we are about to say, Mr. Secretary, is this," said the armed man. "We want a certain document which we know you have on you or about you; it may be in your pocket or in your suitcase. You know well enough what it is; hand it over!"

The Secretary quietly put a hand inside his overcoat, and his captors drew a little nearer. But what he brought out was a cigar case, and he not only helped himself to a cigar, but lighted it carefully and deliberately before replying.

"A document, eh?" he said. "Now, what document?"

"I've already said that you know as well as we do what document!" snapped out the leader. "There is only one document that's of any importance just now. You know that too. There are so many copies of it—one for each member of your Cabinet—and you had yours on you when you left Downing Street after the

Cabinet Council this afternoon. And you've never been out of our sight since. Hand it over, Mr. Secretary!"

The Secretary blew out a thin stream of smoke and sniffed it appreciatively.

"I should like to argue that point with you," he said. "Let us assume that when I left the Cabinet Council—you perceive that I make no attempt to deny that I was there—I had such a document in my possession. Where did I go, then?—since you seem to be so well acquainted with my movements."

"You went straight to Waterloo, got your suitcase out of the cloakroom, and booked for Pimpleton Magna," answered the leader quickly. "You changed trains at Pilbury Junction, and came on this way at once."

"And from Waterloo to Pilbury," remarked the Secretary, "I had a first-class compartment all to myself. So, you didn't have me under observation for at least a hundred and thirty-five miles! Come now!"

"Not under close observation, but we knew where you were, and which compartment," retorted the leader. "And we watched you into the local train that runs between Pilbury and Pimpleton. You've been nowhere where you could get rid of that document, Mr. Secretary. It's on you, and we are going to have it!"

"Does it not occur to you that during my nearly three hours' solitary journey I might have made myself thoroughly acquainted with the contents of that document and then destroyed it?" said the Secretary. "I put it to your intelligence."

"Our intelligence convinces us that you would do no such thing!" replied the other. "We know more than you think. We know that that document, probably a very brief one, contains a certain suggestion which you

Cabinet ministers have got to consider and study most closely between now and Tuesday in secret! You wouldn't destroy it—you have it! Come, now, Mr. Secretary, don't oblige us to use force. This is a fair and square hold-up, engineered with great care. You haven't the remotest idea as to whom you're dealing with, but we are going to have that paper, mere scrap though it may be. Once more—hand it over!"

The Secretary took a pull or two at his cigar. His monocle seemed to glare more than ever. "Let me tell you something," he said suavely. "You are doubtless gentlemen of vast ability and immense resource. But you are not the only people in this surprising world who possess brain power. I myself have a certain—perhaps a small—amount. When I discovered that I was being run away with by your accomplice there who told me tarradiddles at Pimpleton Station, I immediately came to the conclusion that I should presently be held up by somebody who was after the momentous scrap of paper which I certainly did carry away from Downing Street, and which, I may tell you, I have not yet even looked at. And now, I put it to you—do you think a man in my position would take risks? Don't you think—you are evidently men of common sense—don't you think that such a man would take the precaution, while time remained, to—destroy . . . ?"

The three men started, and the leader rapped out the first word of a question.

"You——?"

The Secretary laughed. And then he suddenly moved back to the open door of the taxicab, and, motioning the men to draw near, struck a match and showed them lying on the leather-covered cushion of the front seat a tiny fluffment of gray ash. "You can draw your own

conclusions," he continued, as he laid his hand on his small suitcase. "But—as I think you will now want your taxicab for yourselves—I shall thank you to tell me the nearest way to the Crying Curlew."

An hour later, carrying his modest baggage and fresh as paint, Mr. Mann walked into his beloved hostelry. Its landlord exclaimed loudly at the sight of him.

"Lord bless 'ee, Mr. Mann," he said, "'tis never you! Why, we got a telegram from 'ee this very afternoon sayin' as how you warn't a-coming this here weekend!"

"Changed my mind at the last minute," answered Mr. Mann. "How are you, Tomkins?"

Presently he was in his bedroom alone. And at that he went up to the toilet table, lighted the candles thereon, and did a thing that no mortal had ever seen him do. He took off his monocle, and from the cavity behind it he took out an artificial eye, and from the orbless depth thus left he extracted a tightly compressed scrap of filmy paper, which he presently smoothed out and transferred to a wallet in his hip pocket. That done, he replaced eye and monocle, and in the character of Mr. Mann, the quiet gentleman from London, went cheerily downstairs to his improvised supper.

X

THE PARK LANE MYSTERY

When Spilgrave left the Criminal Investigation Department and set up in business for himself as a private inquiry agent he began to meet some very queer people —much queerer, in his opinion, than any of the folk he had encountered during his five-and-twenty years' acquaintanceship with the criminal classes. Case-hardened as he was to all sorts of dark and doubtful matters, his first experiences in his new capacity afforded him more than sufficient material for surprise. He became familiar with the family secret, and with the skeleton in the cupboard, and with the man of double life, and with the lady whose husband was growing suspicious, and with all the rest of the underground work which is beneath the surface of society. And he had just got nicely used to these things when, one fine spring morning, his confidential clerk entered his private, smartly furnished office and announced that a lady who preferred not to give her name desired to see him.

Spilgrave was accustomed by that time to the descent of ladies who loved secrecy—secrecy before underlings, at any rate. He bade the clerk show the caller in, and rose politely as she presently entered. He was a very good-looking man, Spilgrave, always fastidiously attired and perfectly groomed; his manners were those of a diplomat trained to the reception of high personages; nothing could exceed the gracefulness and considera-

tion with which he bowed his clients to the luxurious chair at the side of his desk. And, so far, most of his callers had been folk of the cream of society, who knew how to give him back what he gave. But as soon as Spilgrave set eyes on this particular visitor he knew that was not a woman of fashion. Her attire, to be sure, was of the most expensive and in the very latest mode, but there was something about her which suggested to the private inquiry agent's knowing eyes that she had not long been accustomed to grandeur. And he was not at all surprised when, his visitor having removed a peculiarly thick veil, he found himself confronting an elderly, homely-featured woman, who, in his secret opinion, would have looked much more at home in a cook's cap and apron than in her silks and laces.

"And how may I have the pleasure of serving you, ma'am?" inquired Spilgrave, assuming his most confidential manner.

The homely-faced lady looked around her. She was obviously astonished at the character of her surroundings, which suggested anything rather than darkness and mystery.

"I suppose it's all what they term 'private' and 'confidential'?" she said, in essentially provincial accents. "Just between you and me, like?"

"Absolutely confidential, my dear madam!" replied Spilgrave. "There is no one here beyond ourselves, and the walls are sound-proof. Whatever you may say to me will go in this ear—and there it'll stop!"

He smiled jocosely, and the lady seemed heartened by his humour.

"My name's Trice," she said. "Lady Trice—though, of course, I haven't been that very long. My husband's Sir John Trice—maybe you'll have heard of him?"

Spilgrave screwed up his eyes. But Lady Trice relieved him.

"Of course, he hasn't been that very long either," she hastened to say. "He's one of those that got their titles when this here British Empire Order came out. We live in Park Lane—but I'll give you my card."

Out of a hundred-guinea vanity bag Lady Trice produced a fifty-guinea cardcase, and handed Spilgrave a highly glazed bit of pasteboard, rather larger than it need have been. The agent received it with becoming reverence, and having deposited it ostentatiously in a safe place, leaned forward toward its giver.

"And what is the little trouble?" he asked suavely. "In confidence."

Lady Trice settled herself in the luxurious chair.

"Well, of course, Mr. Spilgrave," she began, "of course, to be sure, I've read your advertisement in the *Morning Post*, and I've no doubt that in your experience you've had a deal of strange things to deal with, and I make no doubt, either, that you've heard what one may call a lot of family secrets. And so I'd best be plain with you, and tell you just how things are—from the beginning."

"In these cases, Lady Trice, it is always well to begin at the beginning," assented Spilgrave. "It makes things clear."

"Just so," agreed Lady Trice, approvingly. "Well, you must know that when that there war started we were living in Market Toppleton, which, as you may be aware, is a town in Nottinghamshire. We had a grocer's shop there—Trice & Tyler it was called, only there wasn't no Tyler, him being dead a many years, and my husband sole proprietor, but keeping up the old style. A very good business it was, too, and brought in a very

nice thing, Mr. Spilgrave, I can assure you. But when that fighting began my husband—Sir John as is now—he says to me, 'Maria,' he says, 'I'm going in for Government contracts,' he says. 'There's a pot o' money to be made out of that job, Maria,' he says, 'and why shouldn't I have it as well as another?' And, of course, there was no reason why he shouldn't, so he went in."

"With highly satisfactory results, no doubt!" said Spilgrave, rubbing his hands.

Lady Trice looked down at the richness of her skirts. She sighed.

"You've no idea of the money he made!" she answered in a low voice. "I couldn't ha' believed it! They talk about Creesees and them other fellows—I should say they weren't in it. It was like as if everything he touched turned to gold. He hadn't been so long at it before he sold the business—got a nice penny for it, too, stock and goodwill—and turned all his attention to this here contracting. Food it was, of course—and it got to be on a very big scale. Of course, he has a genius for money making, has John—always had, though to be sure you couldn't do much in a grocer's shop before this war started. But when he'd once fairly launched out on these contracts—well!—it's just as I say—the money fair rolled in on him, and heaped itself up at his two feet! And all of a sudden, just about the time that the fighting stopped, he comes to me one day, and he says, 'Maria!' he says, 'I've done it—I'm a millionaire!'"

"Excellent!" said Spilgrave.

Lady Trice rubbed her nose with a thick but beautifully gloved finger.

"Aye, well!" she remarked reflectively. "There's other things than money. However, I'd best to tell you

what I've come about. Of course, in addition to this contracting business, my husband did a deal o' things to help the war—committees and that there—and in the end they made him Sir John. And then naught would suit him but we must leave Market Toppleton and live in London and be fashionable. So he bought this mansion in Park Lane—and there we are! There's expensive furniture, and thousand-pound pictures and statuary, and I don't know what, and horses, and carriages, and motor-cars, and more wine in the cellars nor we could drink in a score years, and yet——"

Lady Trice paused and sighed, and Spilgrave leaned nearer.

"And yet there's a little family trouble?" he suggested sympathetically. "Confide in me, my dear lady. It may be—nothing!"

"Well, I'll tell you what it is," said Lady Trice. "Of course, it's a very different life to what we used to live. The fact is, we've nothing to do. One gets tired o' spending money, and a drive round the park once or twice a day's naught. So far, we haven't been called on by any o' the big nobs, and of course, as John says, we've soared above the circles in which we used to figure. We do, to be sure, go a great deal to the theatre—and that may have something to do with what I'm going to tell you, in secret."

"Precisely," observed Spilgrave. "In secret!"

"Well, it's this," continued Lady Trice. "For some time past my husband's been up to something that I know nothing about. He's carrying on some game of his own. Twice a week, Tuesdays, and Saturdays, regular as clockwork, he goes out as soon as breakfast's over, and he never comes in again till dinner time, eight o'clock at night. I've asked him, time and again, where

he's been—he never says anything but that he's been having a look round. But why them days, regular? No! He goes somewhere!"

"Have you any suspicion, my dear lady?" suggested the agent. "Any little notion?"

"Well," replied Lady Trice, after a long pause, "I wouldn't like to think that he'd got led away by one o' them actresses. He's always been a regular one for the theatre, and he's a great eye for beauty—I know him! And the way them young women makes eyes at the men! London's a very wicked place, in my opinion, Mr. Spilgrave. And there's no fools like old ones."

"Sir John admires the ladies, I gather?" asked Spilgrave.

"He was always a bit soft after young 'uns," admitted Lady Trice. "In the old days, when we used to stay at hydropathics and them sort of resorts, he was always making up to the young gels—buying 'em chocolates and flowers and such like. And if one of these here London actresses has got hold of him——"

Lady Trice sighed, and her listener brought matters to a practical issue.

"In fact, my dear lady, you would like to know, as a matter of certainty, where Sir John goes every Tuesday and Saturday?" he said. "You would, of course—just to set your mind at rest. Very good—nothing easier."

"How will you do it?" inquired Lady Trice.

"To-day is Monday," said Spilgrave. "To-morrow is Tuesday. I will see to this matter myself. When Sir John leaves your place in Park Lane to-morrow morning I shall be without, and I shall follow him. Call here on Wednesday, and I will tell you where he went."

"And he won't know?" asked Lady Trice.

"No more than the man in the moon!" asserted Spil-

grave. "Now just describe him, and tell me the exact time at which he quits the house."

Next morning, at precisely half-past nine, Sir John Trice walked out of his Park Lane mansion, and without so much as a glance to right or left marched away southward toward Piccadilly. He was of medium height, a clean-shaven, chubby-cheeked, rosy-faced man, apparently about sixty years of age, and there was nothing whatever about him to suggest the rake or the millionaire. He was well but quietly and modestly dressed in the fashion of most gentlemen of his age, and had certainly not given more than a guinea for his umbrella. A highly respectable, quiet-mannered old bird! thought Spilgrave; and of a type which you may see by the hundred in city circles. But you never know, and he had his fee to earn, and so went leisurely on the track of his quarry.

Sir John Trice walked down Park Lane to the tube station in Down Street. Spilgrave followed him within, and descended in the same lift, and presently got into the same carriage in an eastward-bound train. At Piccadilly Circus Sir John got out; so did Spilgrave. Sir John made for the Bakerloo line; Spilgrave followed suit. Eventually Spilgrave found himself at the Elephant and Castle; Sir John was a few yards in front of him. It was not until then that Spilgrave really began to wonder what Sir John was after.

But he was not long in doubt. The pursued turned along the New Kent Road, and walked sharply onward for a quarter of a mile. Suddenly he turned into a shop and disappeared, and Spilgrave, looking up, saw the sign above that shop—"Chipchase, Grocer and Italian Warehouseman." He then remembered that he knew Chipchase; some years previously there had been a

burglary at this very shop; the burglars had broken open Chipchase's safe one Saturday night and abstracted his day's takings. He, Spilgrave, had been sent to investigate the affair, and had succeeded, greatly to Chipchase's delight, in tracking and arresting the criminals. At that time he had often had a talk with Chipchase.

But what was Sir John Trice doing at Chipchase's establishment? Then Spilgrave remembered that in other days Sir John had been a grocer himself. Probably he and Chipchase were old friends, or had business relations; perhaps, once upon a time, they had been fellow-'prentices, and now Sir John was doing nothing more harmful than making a friendly call on an old acquaintance. Anyway, so far, there were no signs of actresses and that sort of thing—actresses, at least of the highly dangerous sort, do not live in the New Kent Road. Yet, the day was young, and Sir John was doubtless going further afield. Spilgrave hung around, waiting.

Sir John, however, failed to reappear. Five, ten, fifteen minutes elapsed, and still he did not emerge. And so Spilgrave went inside. It was a biggish shop, where a good trade was done, and there were several assistants behind the counter. But Spilgrave, after one moment's look round, saw but one—the man he had followed, who, in his shirt sleeves, and with a spotless white apron tied about his middle, was cheerfully weighing out a half pound of best mixed for a garrulous lady with a basket. There was no mistaking him.

Spilgrave was just thinking what he could buy that would not incommode him when he felt a slap on his arm and turned to find Chipchase at his side.

"How are you?" said the grocer, extending a hand. "Haven't seen you down our way ever since that little affair of—you know! Quite a stranger!"

Spilgrave resumed his usual calmness. He gave Chipchase a glance.

"A word with you!" he whispered. "Between ourselves."

Chipchase winked and led the way to a private office.

"Something up?" he asked.

"Look here!" said Spilgrave. "Who's that elderly assistant of yours?—the chap with the rosy cheeks—left-hand counter? Mind you, I know nothing against him—but—who is he?"

The grocer laughed.

"Mr. Johnson!" he said. "Ah!—I'll tell you, my boy!—you'll laugh. He's a party who came in here one day, got talking to me, told me he was of the same trade as myself, had made his pile, and retired, and was—bored to death! He asked me to let him come here and put in two days a week at counter work, just to give him something to do, for nothing but love of the thing—said he'd bless me for ever if I would! And as I was short-handed, and he was so keen on it, I took his offer. And a jolly good assistant he is, and don't it do him good! Fair revels in it, my boy!"

"Can you keep a secret?" said Spilgrave. "But of course you can! Then I'll tell you a tale that's just as good. . . . There," he concluded, when he had made an end. "That's who your Mr. Johnson is! Funny, what?"

"It don't do him no harm," answered the grocer. "Lord bless you!—I understand it. Take a look at him through that bit of glass, my boy! Why, he's as happy as the day's long! Who'd disturb him?"

"Not me!" responded Spilgrave. And he went away to invent a story which would satisfy Lady Trice and leave Sir John free to continue his peaceful diversions.

XI

THE BUTTERTUBS PASS

Ever since a certain autumn afternoon on which he had crossed the famous Buttertubs Pass from Hawes to Muker, Ridsmore, just then coming into recognition as a landscape painter, had cherished a great desire to go back there some day, settle himself for the summer in one of the little dale towns, and get out of that romantic scenery a picture that would live. He had been much impressed by the walk over that pass; so much impressed, indeed, that he had purposely spent the whole afternoon and the earlier part of the evening in accomplishing its eight miles of distance. There was so much to see—the mountain called Lovely Seat on one side, its rival of Shunnor Fell on the other; the wonderful view from the head of the pass, looking southward, whence Ingleborough, towering above the high lands at the extremity of Widdale, is seen in company with its sister eminences of Great and Little Whernside; the precipitous and rocky rivulet called Cliffe Beck; the striking prospect of Swaledale, seen as Muker is approached—all this appealed to the artistic sense in him in a high and compelling fashion. Interest of another sort was roused in him by the curious shafts, deep and vertical, in the limestone beds at the head of the pass, from whence the pass itself has derived its local name—Buttertubs. Ridsmore had never seen anything like

these extraordinary cavities; he lingered long about them, peering into their dark, cavernous recesses and weaving all sorts of strange fancies around them. Had an expert geologist been with him, Ridsmore would have learned that these holes were caused many an age ago by the erosive action of water on originally small fissures. But Ridsmore was no geologist, and cared little for scientific explanations of things that pleased him; the Buttertubs fitted in well with all the rest of their romantic surroundings, and when he went to bed that night in a roadside inn, many miles farther north, it was with a firm resolve to return to the pass some day with brush and palette and canvas, and stop there as long as he liked.

The opportunity for carrying out this resolution came at last, and one evening of an unusually fine and appealing spring found Ridsmore installed in the Farmers' Arms at Muker, whence he had transported his various belongings over the pass from the nearest railway point at Hawes. He had come with the intention of spending at least two months amid these wilds, consequently he felt at leisure to lay out his first few days in apparently idle fashion. Yet he was not idle, for he was looking round with a keen, observant eye, alive enough to artistic values and possibilities, for his subject. For three days he was about the head of the pass from soon after breakfast until evening drew near, never going far away from a centre point, but considering from various angles and vantage grounds the southward prospect which he meant to paint. Doubtless to such of the country folk as saw him he seemed a very idle man indeed—what is there but idleness in a well-dressed gentleman who sits about on rocks, munches sandwiches, takes an occasional drink out of a silver bottle, smokes innumerable pipes of

tobacco, and stares at sky and hill and valley as if he were demented? That such a man and such doings had any relation to money—except to spend and waste it—could be nothing but unbelievable to the rustic intelligence. And if passing drovers or shepherds responded civilly to Ridsmore's cheery greeting, they were sure, after going by, to scratch their heads in wonder that there were folk in the world who had nothing to do but hang about hilltops, lifting their hands to naught.

But by the end of the first week Ridsmore lifted his hands. He might have been far more usefully employed, thought some of the dalesfolk, no doubt, if he had taken a pail of whitewash and a big brush and titivated old Mother Simpson's cottage; but though his brush was small and his field of labour a canvas which could be easily carried under one arm, he was at work. He had, in fact, set to work seriously. Every morning, as soon as breakfast was over, a boy carried up his necessaries from the Farmers' Arms to the top of the pass; Ridsmore himself carried his canvas. All day he painted; toward the end of the afternoon the boy appeared again; together they went down to the little town. It was a pleasant life for Ridsmore, and one that he thoroughly loved; he was fortunate, too, in that the weather remained delightfully fine. Now and then, to be sure, there were breaks—you cannot remain long at nearly two thousand feet above sea level without encountering rain and sleet and sometimes worse. But close to the spot which he had chosen as the vantage ground for his picture, Ridsmore, who was essentially a man to look well after himself, had found a very convenient cave, proof against anything in the shape of a storm, and thither, with his belongings, he retreated when the weather grew unfriendly. He came to regard this cave as a sort of mountain snug, and being

inclined to comfort, he fitted it up with a soft seat or two, and took to lunching in it.

One day, as Ridsmore was finishing his sandwiches and staring out of his cave at the prospect of which he was never weary, he heard the sound of shuffling feet on the limestone surfaces somewhere near, and, looking round a corner of the cave's narrow entrance, saw an old man. Now by that time Ridsmore knew all the folk thereabouts, and especially the old men, with whom, of set purpose, he used to chat of an evening at his inn. But this old man he did not know, and he knew well that if he had ever seen him before he would never have forgotten him. For he was an odd old man—a tall, gaunt, very ancient person, and apparently as dirty as he was ancient; he looked, indeed, as if he never washed, and his hair and beard had certainly not been under the barber's scissors for a long, long time. As for his attire, it seemed to consist, chiefly, of a battered felt hat tied firmly upon his head and under his chin with a stout piece of twine; of a coat, green and mouldy with age, that enveloped its wearer from top to toe, and of footwear made up of swathings of rag and sacking, held together by more stout twine. There was, however, a certain picturesqueness in all this, and if Ridsmore had been a figure painter he would have gone out of his cave and offered this excellent model five shillings.

Instead, he remained where he was, watching. For the old man's movements were peculiar, if not actually suspicious. Muttering to himself, glancing first over one shoulder, then over the other, he moved forward across the limestone surfaces until he came to a part where, as Ridsmore knew, there lay some of the deeper cavities which gave a name to the pass. His glances right and

left became more observant as he reached them—clearly, he was anxious not to be observed himself. And . . .

Just then, as matters seemed to be getting to an interesting point, a sudden gust of wind blew into the cave, and Ridsmore turned sharply to seize upon his canvas, which he had propped erect on a ledge of rock while he ate his lunch. When he had made it safe he turned again and looked out. The old man had disappeared.

Ridsmore's first thought was that the old fellow had fallen into one of the cavities. But on reflection he decided that he had merely descended into one for unknown purposes of his own. So he waited and watched. Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes went by; then out of one of the buttertubs a head emerged—the old man came to light again. Once erect, on the brim of this subterranean retreat, he looked all round as before; apparently satisfied that there was no one about, he began to shuffle slowly away. And at that, Ridsmore, pipe in mouth and hands in pockets, emerged from his cave and cut across the old fellow's path.

He was scarcely prepared for what followed. At the first sound of footsteps on the limestone the old man turned as sharply as a hare, and at sight of a stranger betrayed a curious mixture of emotion. There was a considerable cloak of dirt and grime on his rugged face, but it could not hide anger, suspicion, fear, dislike. And there was a quick lifting of his right arm which showed Ridsmore that in other days its owner had been as ready with a blow as with word. So he nodded reassuringly.

"Hullo!" he said. "Having a look round?"

The old man straightened himself from the half-crouching attitude into which he had fallen and looked his questioner up and down.

"Who might you be?" he demanded suddenly.

"Nobody in particular," answered Ridsmore. "Just hanging round a bit, that's all. Painting a picture, if you want to know. Like to see it?"

But the old man was already sheering off, muttering inaudibly. He shuffled some twenty yards away, sat down on a ledge of rock, pulled out a well-blackened clay pipe and tobacco from some secret corner of his disreputable rags, and began to smoke. And Ridsmore went back to his cave and got his things and began to paint again. All that afternoon he painted, and all the afternoon the old man sat like a statue—except that he continued to smoke. Now and then Ridsmore glanced at him, but he got no answering glance.

At five o'clock Ridsmore's boy came. He was a sharp boy, and Ridsmore was increasing his sharpness in their daily walks.

"Who's that old chap sitting over there?" asked Ridsmore as the boy came up. "Do you know him?"

The boy looked across, and smiled widely.

"Yes, sir, it's old Dan'l Marris," he answered. "Dan o' the Pass, they call him, Mr. Ridsmore."

"Why?" inquired Ridsmore.

"'Cause he's always up and down about here, sir," said the boy. "Like he is now—always about. Only," he added, "I haven't seen him of late; they say he's been over the hills, Stainmore way."

"Where does he live?" asked Ridsmore.

"In an old tumble-down cottage, foot of Stockdale, sir," answered the boy. "'Tisn't fit for a pig to live in. But that's where he does live."

"Bit mad, eh?" suggested Ridsmore.

"Don't know, sir; don't think so," said the boy. "All I know is that I've scarcely ever come up here, Mr. Ridsmore, without seeing him sitting about, like he's doing now."

"Did you ever see him go down any of these pot-holes?" inquired Ridsmore.

The boy stared wonderingly.

"Down one of the buttertubs, sir? No, sir," he replied. "There's no bottom to some of those, Mr. Ridsmore; didn't you know that, sir?"

Ridsmore laughed and began to pack up his things, and presently he and the boy went off. They left Dan o' the Pass sitting on his ledge of rock. And he was there, placidly pulling at his black pipe, when they came back again next morning. The boy went away, and Ridsmore went on with his work; whenever he glanced toward the ledge of rock the old man was still there, still statuesque. And there he was at noon, and there he was when the boy came up again at five o'clock. And the same thing went on next day, and the day after that, and on the following morning Dan o' the Pass was still in evidence, and he was beginning to get on Ridsmore's nerves. So at lunch time that day Ridsmore made toward him whereupon the old fellow got up, mumbling, and went shuffling away. But when Ridsmore gave up the pursuit his quarry sat down again; he was for all the world like a sentinel dog, which may be driven from a given point but hangs about, intent on returning to it.

That night Ridsmore, smoking an after-dinner pipe in the village street, chanced across a dale farmer with whom he sometimes talked. They turned into the inn and took a glass together. And Ridsmore put a sudden question.

"Who's that queer old chap who's always up there at the top of the pass?" he asked. "Sort of animated scarecrow."

The farmer laughed, as if the description tickled his fancy.

"Old Dan o' the Pass, as they call him," he said. "Oh, he's an old drover that used to take livestock across there. Queer, half-crazed old fellow; can't keep away from up yonder, some reason or other. You'll always find him there, foul or fair, as long as daylight lasts. Then he goes home to a sort of cabin he's got down below."

"How does he live?" asked Ridsmore.

The farmer shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, got a bit o' brass put away somewhere," he answered. "It'll not take much to keep his like. You've seen him, then, Mr. Ridsmore?"

Ridsmore might have answered that he had seen little else for the last few days. But that seemed superfluous; he expected to see the gaunt apparition again next morning. And so he did—but on this occasion, as soon as the boy had departed, Dan o' the Pass, to the artist's immense surprise, came shuffling across from his sentry post. He eyed Ridsmore angrily, and the easel and its contents with great contempt. Then he spoke—and Ridsmore knew then that the old man was neither half-crazed nor even eccentric; he was merely suspicious and impatient.

"How long might you expect to be i' finishing that job o' yours?" he demanded. "'Tis six or seven mortal days you been at it now, and you don't seem to get no forrarder!"

"Six or seven weeks, then," retorted Ridsmore calmly. "Got any objection? Don't you like the look of me?"

The old man glared at him doubtfully.

"Don't hold wi' stranger folk hanging about here!" he growled. "You'd best to take your picturing elsewhere. Ain't nothing but idleness, that make o' things!"

"You seem to be a well-occupied gentleman yourself, my friend," said Ridsmore. "Go away!"

Dan o' the Pass went off, muttering, but after shuffling a few yards he came back.

"Tell ye what I'll do, mister," he said, changing his tone to one of cajolery, "I'll give ye a gold pound for that there bit of a drawing, and then do ye go away! Money down!"

"What would you do with it?" asked Ridsmore.

"Sell it to one o' the publicans at Hawes," answered the old man promptly. "It'll do for to hang in the bar."

"We'll see—when I've finished it," said Ridsmore. "Didn't I say just now it would take me six or seven weeks yet? I'm only beginning. But I'll bear your offer in mind."

Dan o' the Pass went off finally at that, growling more than ever, to resume his station on his favourite ledge of rock. It was quite clear that he was not to be moved from his sentry point while Ridsmore was in that neighbourhood. And so the time passed on, and every day, save on Sundays and occasional holidays, Ridsmore sat there and painted, and Dan o' the Pass sat on his rock and smoked rank tobacco. It was useless for Ridsmore to endeavour to cultivate friendly relations—the old man would have none of them. To him, evidently, the artist was an ever-present enemy who required constant watching.

The picture was finished at last, and one afternoon Rismore quitted the pass for good. He left the old man still sitting there. Next morning he returned to London

by way of Reeth and Richmond, therefore he did not go over the pass again, and consequently his last vision of it was associated with the gaunt, scarecrow figure of its sentinel, keeping guard. But over what?—and why? Ridsmore often wondered. Then, months later, in the middle of a particularly hard and severe winter, he got a letter from the boy who had acted as his porter at Muker—brief and graphic.

Dear Mr. Ridsmore [it ran]. You said I was to write when there was any news. Old Dan Marris was found dead at the bottom of one of the buttertubs last week, because he'd been missing for some time, and they looked for him and found him, there, and there was a box full of gold and silver money in his arms when they found him, and father says he'd hidden his money down that hole, they buried him yesterday, so no more from your respectful and affectionate friend, and hoping you will come next year, JACK KILTHWAITE.

Then Ridsmore understood, and Dan o' the Pass became more interesting than ever.

XII

THE RIEVAULX CRUCIFIX

When Rimmington, then a young doctor of three years' standing, went to Helmsley as *locum tenens* to a local practitioner whose health had broken down, he had very little notion of the character of the country into which his engagement was taking him. A Southerner himself, he had never been North before. There was as much novelty in the adventure, it seemed to him, as there would have been in crossing wide seas. Being much busied before his hurried departure from London, he had no time to consult reference books or topographical works; a hasty glance at a map of Yorkshire told him no more than that Helmsley appeared to be a small country town, a sort of last outpost of civilization, with vast stretches of wild and solitary land, moor, hill, valley, lying behind it. He observed in that hasty glance that north of Helmsley there lies a huge tract of Yorkshire wherein no railway runs, where the high roads are few, the apparently desert places many, and where there are miles upon miles of country destitute of human habitation. The prospect attracted him; he was something of a student and a good deal of a nature lover; the man who had engaged his services had already told him that his duties would leave him considerable leisure. So Rimmington took a boxful of books with him, intending to read, but when he had fairly settled

down in his comfortable quarters in the little moorland town he wished that, instead of being a student, he had been an artist. For there, all around him, was some of the most glorious scenery in England—dark hillsides, romantic valleys, villages which time's progress had left unchanged. There, too, in particular, were the remains of the older England which fascinated him—the ancient Saxon church of Kirkdale, with its unique sundial; the keep of Helmsley Castle, mutilated, but still impressive in its strength; and last, but most wonderful of all, the still considerable mass of the ruins of Rievaulx, first to be founded of the eight Cistercian abbeys of Yorkshire.

Before he had been in Helmsley a month Rimmington had thrown aside all the books that he had brought with him from London, and had become whole-heartedly enthusiastic about the archæology of the district wherein he was going to spend an entire year. He read nothing but local topography and antiquities; he cultivated the acquaintance of the local antiquaries; he even fell a victim to the fever which lays hold on the lover of the past, and began to collect things. Going about as he did among ancient farmsteads and old cottages, he was able to pick up a good deal; the mania gathered strength in him; ere long he never entered any of the Old World houses into which his professional duties took him without casting the collector's eye on covetable matters. Long before his year as place holder to the absent practitioner had come to an end Rimmington had become a confirmed picker-up of what the unenlightened would call rubbish. But it was no rubbish to him, and he was just at the height of his fever when fate brought him in contact with a relic of the past such as it has been given to few men to set eyes on. One night in the early

days of autumn he was deep in his new studies when a ring came at the bell of his adjacent surgery. He opened its door, to find a country lad who held a smoking horse by its bridle and stared at him anxiously.

"Well," demanded Rimmington. "Somebody ill?"

The lad, thus spurred, found his tongue.

"Will ya please cume to Mestur Malbis?" he said.

"Mr. Malbis!" asked Rimmington. "Where?"

"T'other side o' Rivvis ruins," answered the lad. "They said—to come at once."

"What's the matter?" inquired Rimmington.

"Dunno," said the messenger. "He wor ta'en varry bad after t' supper."

"Is he an old man?" asked Rimmington.

The lad's eyebrows contracted in an evident serious effort to give a proper reply.

"'Bout ninety year old, I think," he answered.

"All right, I'll come—at once," said Rimmington. "Go back and tell them."

To summon the man who drove him about on his country rounds, to put some possibly useful things into a bag, and to make himself ready for a cold night drive was the work of a few minutes; presently he was on his way. His driver knew who Mr. Malbis was, and loquaciously posted Rimmington in knowledge of him as they sped along.

"He's a reight owd patriarch, is Mestur Malbis, sir," he said. "Him and his has been on that there land o' theirs they do say since t' Normans were in England—aye, before Helmsley Castle were builded, or Rivvis Abbey either! Howsomever, he's t' last on 'em, doctor."

"No children?" asked Rimmington.

"Neither lad nor lass, sir—all gone," replied the driver. "He's a couple o' women relatives 'at lives wi'

him, but naught nearer. T' owd stock comes to an end wi' him!"

All this made Rimmington curious about his patient, and his curiosity was deepened when his driver, soon after they had passed the mighty ruins of Rievaulx, desolate, yet magnificent in the gray light and the awe-striking silence, turned into the courtyard of an ancient farmhouse, which Rimmington had often seen in driving that way, and had just as often admired for its Fifteenth Century architecture. He jumped from the dogcart and walked into a deep stone porch; its inner door was immediately opened by the lad whom he had previously seen at the door of his own surgery.

"You're to come straight up t' stairs," he announced. "I'm to show ya t' way."

Rimmington followed across a gloomy hall, through a half-lighted living room, dark with old oak panelling and furniture, up an ancient, heavily balustered staircase, and along an unevenly floored passage at its head.

The lad carried a lamp; in its feeble light Rimmington saw as they went along that he was in one of the oldest houses he had ever known, and among some of the oldest things—brass, china, glass, silver—he had ever seen; there were the accumulations of centuries all round him. And suddenly his guide opened a door, and Rimmington stepped in upon a scene which made him, for the second time since his coming into that district, wish that he had the powers of the artist in colour.

The room was big and deep and full of shadow, like all the rest of the house that he had seen, an oak-panelled place; its recesses seemed to melt away into darkness. But there was a bright fire glowing in the wide hearthplace, and on a table near it burned a lamp, and near the table was an old-fashioned tapestried bed,

wherein, sitting erect, propped high by many pillows, was the oldest man Rimmington had ever seen. He was a big man, a man who in his prime must have stood far above six feet in height; a stalwart man of a massive frame and a fine, well-shaped head. Those about him had wrapped around his shoulders a gown of dark stuff; against its sombreness hung down a long white beard which, as Rimmington was quick to see, must, when its owner stood erect, have reached his waist.

There were two elderly women in the room, quiet-mannered, old-fashioned things; one came timidly forward as the doctor entered. Rimmington drew her aside.

"What is it?" he whispered. "Was he taken ill suddenly?"

The woman gave him a look which meant much.

"He went faint after his supper," she answered in a corresponding whisper. "Turned weak. We gave him some brandy and got him to bed. But he's ninety-five!"

"Exactly!" said Rimmington. "I understand."

He went over to the bedside then, and bent toward the old man, who suddenly lifted his eyes and gave him a keen glance. Rimmington was astonished when he met that glance, and looked at the eyes from which it came; he saw that the sight of those eyes—strong, black eyes—was unimpaired, and that the brain behind was still unclouded. And yet, from other signs, he knew that the old man's time was at hand.

"Well, Mr. Malbis?" he said, as he took the big hand within his own. "How do you feel?"

The old man gave Rimmington's fingers a faint pressure. Then, without answering his question, he glanced at the elder of the two women.

"Kezia!" he said.

"Yes, Uncle Matthew," she answered, coming nearer. "What is it?"

"Do you and Katherine there go away downstairs and leave me with the doctor," commanded Malbis. "I want to talk to him. And hark ye, lassies!—if the parson comes he's not to come here, nor are you, till the doctor says—d'ye mind?"

Rimmington saw that the old man had been an autocrat in his own household; the two women went quickly and silently away and closed the door, and Malbis turned to him.

"Sit you down on my bedside there," he went on, in tones which, weak though they were, were firm and clear. "I ha' something to ask of you."

"Don't tire yourself in asking it," said Rimmington. "Take your time."

The old man shook his head.

"It's all right," he answered, almost impatiently. "I understand—time's up, Doctor!—had a long, long run—ninety-five years—all prepared—will made—everything left to those two lassies—but—there's this—listen! You're the young fellow that's doing Millerston's work for him. I've heard of you. And you're fond of old things—bit of an—an antiquary?"

"Yes," replied Rimmington, wonderingly. "Why, Mr. Malbis?"

The old man gave him another keen look out of his deep black eyes—a shrewd, knowing look.

"And you're a gentleman, too," he said. "I can see that. You'll keep a secret. Listen! I'm going to tell you one that's never been known to anybody but the head of my family and his eldest son for nigh on to four hundred years. Handed on to father and son—always

told to the eldest son the day he came of age, and so on one generation to another. If there were younger sons, they never knew it; if there were lassies, they never knew it. And so it's gone, as I say, near four hundred years. But now—I've no son—I had three; all gone long since. And so it's over, and my end's come. And it's this, Doctor. But give me a sup of that drink there."

Rimmington gave the old man a drink and sat down by his side again, holding his hand and keeping his finger on his pulse.

"Yes," he said. "Gently, now. And what is it?"

"This," continued Malbis. "You know when they were all turned out of Rievaulx there in old Henry the Eighth's day, and the place made into the ruin it is, of course! And you know how the abbey was spoiled and sacked, how the gold and silver went to London, and the lead was stripped off and sold, and so on, to be sure. But not all the gold and silver went to the King. Some of it was buried, and some was hidden otherwise, and some was stolen, and some was trusted to folk in the hope that better days would come. And we were here then; aye, been here for three hundred years or more before that. And now, Doctor, I tell you, when it was known that the old abbey was going to be sacked, one of the monks brought to the Malbis of that day, in this very house, a certain silver crucifix by which they set great store, and begged him to keep it safely hidden. He took it in, and that's the secret, Doctor, that's been handed from one Malbis to another. You understand?"

"You have the crucifix?" whispered Rimmington.

The old man slipped a hand under the counterpane and drew out a key. "Look under my bed," he said. "You'll see a box bound with iron at the corners. Pull it

out; open it. Look down in the right-hand near corner, Doctor, you'll feel another small, flattish box; bring it out."

Rimmington followed all these directions wonderingly. A few moments later, seated again on the side of the old man's bed, he watched Malbis open a small oblong box, obviously, from its workmanship, made centuries before, yet fresh enough to all appearance so far as preservation was concerned. The lid came away in the old man's grip, and there, lying amid folds of soft stuff, Rimmington saw a small, exquisitely carved silver crucifix. He looked at it in silence. Then the old man suddenly replaced the lid and thrust the box into his hands.

"Yes?" said Rimmington. "To be done with—what?"

Malbis laid a hand on his.

"You know the abbey?" he whispered. "You'll have been about the ruins? Then you know what's left of the chancel. There's a tomb there, a slab, with an opening in its side. It'll never be disturbed now! Put it in there—for me—let it go back to where it came from. And then—a secret!"

"Yes," answered Rimmington.

The old man gave him a meaning glance.

"Go now!" he said.

Rimmington slipped the box into his overcoat pocket. Without another word, and believing that his patient was in no immediate danger, he left the room, called the two women, told them that he should presently return, and went out into the night. His driver had put up the horse and trap and was talking to the stolid-faced lad in the kitchen. Rimmington glanced in at them as he passed along the courtyard, and wondered, half whimsi-

cally, what they would think if they knew of his strange mission.

For it was strange, and its very strangeness appealed deeply to him. There he was, hurrying through the night to those great, solemn, desecrated ruins close by, to throw into some cavity in the long-silent chancel a relic that had been carefully treasured and guarded for nearly four hundred years—a relic that some men would give vast sums to possess, that ought, perhaps, to be placed in some national repository of such things—and all to satisfy the whim of a dying man! But he had got to do it.

He was among the ruins at last; the grandeur of them in the half light and in the hush of night seemed infinitely greater than at either morning or eventide. He almost fancied that he heard the rustle of ghostly figures about him as he made his way to the chancel. He knew where the tomb was of which the old man had told him, and he had noticed the opening in it, and he slipped the ancient box, wrought long ago by some carpenter lay brother, and its precious contents inside. And then, for the first time that night he felt a curious sense of fear. For no sound followed his action—it was as if unseen hands had taken back, in silence and reverence, the thing he had brought. An odd fancy struck him—it might be that the dead monk, abbot, prior, whoever he was who lay beneath that ancient slab, had once owned the crucifix which the Malbises had guarded during four centuries.

He lingered a moment or two, full of these curious thoughts—then his professional instincts sent him out of the ruins, and across the meadow without, and back to the old farmhouse. Passing the lighted kitchen window, he looked in. The shock-headed farm lad had

fetched the driver a jug of ale; the driver was just lifting its frothing contents to his ready lips. Rimmington smiled and passed on, and letting himself into the house contrived to make his way through the silent rooms and up the stairway to his patient's chamber But as he reached it the door opened, and the woman whom Malbis had called Kezia came out, and at the sight of him held up a finger.

"He's gone!" she whispered. "He died quite sudden, Doctor—as sudden as ever it could be—just ten minutes ago!"

XIII

A ROMANCE OF WOOKEY HOLE

Professor Browne-Mitchison was known to all his circle of acquaintance as the most modest and unassuming of men. Most things about him betokened his modesty and made evident his naturally retiring disposition. Slightly built, eminently refined of feature, it was only the brightness of his eyes and the alertness of his look and gesture that redeemed him from an almost feminine delicacy of appearance; oddly enough, however, he invariably affected garments of a distinctly sporting sort—loud checks and pronounced tones; he even sported a gold horseshoe pin in his cravats, as if he had been a hunting man. But this was his little weakness; he had a curious fancy for seeing himself in clothes which would have done no discredit to an outside bookmaker. It was, perhaps, his way of asserting his manliness; however that may be, certain it was that his loud suits, his fawn spats, and his neckwear formed an amusing contrast to his usual half-shy, half-abstracted manner. A spick-and-span, quiet little gentleman this professor, yet in one respect he was as full of vanity and assurance as an old cheese is of mites—no one getting him on to his favourite subject could long be unaware that he held himself to be, without question or demur, the very greatest authority that lived, or that ever had lived, on the subject of caves.

The professor—who, to describe him fully, held the

chair of geology in the University of Millchester—had some grounds for this opinion. He had been a cave hunter all his life of nine-and-thirty years. The fact is, he had first seen the light in the neighbourhood of the Cresswell Caves, in Derbyshire, and at an age when most boys are birds'-nesting or tickling trout he was exploring cavities and fissures, galleries and passages, and already forming ideas and theories about the tenancy of these retreats by folk who lived in them in the long-vanished past. As time went on his experience of caves increased. He had visited and explored every cave of importance in Europe. Blessed with ample means, he had spent much money and a good deal of time in visiting caves that lay far off. He had seen the cockroaches of the caves in the Philippine Islands, and the colourless fish of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky, and the blind salamanders of the Rock House Cave in Missouri, and the sightless snails which are found in certain caves in Austria—in short, Professor Browne-Mitchison had seen about everything that the world could show in this way. And he had, of course, written a big book on the subject; it was published on his thirty-sixth birthday, and he wondered rather wistfully as he looked at it, supposing he lived another thirty-six years, if he would have accumulated more knowledge on a matter wherein he believed himself to be unsurpassed in learning. He thought not. Modest about politics, uncertain about the very ordinary things of life, the professor felt that when it came to any question about caves he was infallible. In fact, it is on record that upon one occasion he was heard to remark that while there might be some little delicate doubt as to whether the pope is or is not infallible in matters of faith and morals, there could be none that when he, Browne-

Mitchison, delivered a pronouncement on caves and cave dwellers it was an *ex cathedra* decision against which there could be no possible appeal.

Much as the professor knew about caves, and intimate as he was with them, he found it literally impossible to keep away from their neighbourhoods. He regularly went cave hunting at Christmas, and at Easter, and at Whitsuntide; as soon as the long vacation set in he prepared for a perfect orgy of exploration. His friends used to tell him that sooner or later, penetrating into the cavernous and gloomy recesses in which his soul delighted, he would either lose his way or fall down some bottomless abyss and so never be seen again; the mere mention of these possibilities, and the thought of an unexplored passage or a peculiarly black and horrible cavity, were to the professor as the smell of powder to an old war horse—they only made him hasten his packing. He loved his professorial duties much, and felt like a maternal uncle toward his students, but any hole opening out of a limestone ravine or behind some bush on a mountainside fascinated him—he would have gone into a rabbit burrow if he had been no bigger than a rabbit.

One fine April morning found the professor taking his way out of the romantic city of Wells toward Wookey Hole, that ancient and mysterious cavern which lies on the southern slopes of the Mendip Hills. He was not quite sure if this was his tenth or his eleventh visit to Wookey Hole—it was certainly one or the other. But he was one of those men who never lose interest in anything that has once interested, and he looked forward to renewing his acquaintance with Wookey Hole as ardently as a lover anticipates a renewal of adventure with a mistress from whom he has been separated for a

while; he meant to have a whole week's philandering with its well-remembered charms. And, being fond of solitude, he was a little taken aback when, on reaching the mouth of the cave, he encountered a young lady who, it was very evident, had come thither with the same intention that he himself had.

The professor hitherto had never greatly concerned himself about young ladies. True, he had often lectured to them, but somehow he had never regarded them as being in any way different from the young men. However, vaguely realizing that here was a young lady who manifestly had some interest in caves, he looked at this one and endeavoured to comprehend that she was a human being. He realized, too, in time, and very dimly, but with growing intelligence, that she was eminently attractive. She was a tall, well-developed young lady, about half as big again as himself, athletic, handsome; he even noted that she had brown eyes and beautiful brown hair. She was garbed fittingly and simply for cave-exploration purposes, and the professor began to wonder about her. And while he was wondering, tongue-tied, the young lady spoke and smiled. The smile was of the sort which strangers, thrown together in out-of-the-way places, give each other, the spoken words were simple. She asked if the professor was going into the cave. When he stammeringly replied that he certainly was, she remarked that in that case they might just as well go in together. Therewith, as if she knew Wookey Hole very well, she led the way, and the professor meekly followed.

But, mild as Professor Browne-Mitchison was on what we may call lay occasions, his mildness and meekness departed instantly as soon as he got firmly fixed in the saddle of his favourite hobbyhorse. Once within

any cave, from Yorkshire to Kent, he could no more help orating and exemplifying than a cat can keep off cream. And before he and his chance-met companion had been in Wookey Hole ten minutes he was off and away, pouring out a flood of information which sounded very like extracts from a textbook. Almost unconscious of an audience, he held on, pointing here and pointing there, and thoroughly enjoying himself. But eventually the big brown-eyed girl got a look in, and when she at last spoke her speech was accompanied by a sort of sizing-up glance which took in the professor from top to toe.

"You seem to know something about caves," she remarked speculatively. "Do you get it out of guide books?"

The professor felt as if somebody had poured a bucketful of ice-cold water down his spine. But instead of shrinking he drew himself up to the full extent of his five foot four.

"Er—ah!" he said. "I—may I ask if you know anything about caves?"

"I've examined a good many," replied the girl. "Here and abroad."

The professor became still more erect.

"The fact is," he remarked, "I am Professor Browne-Mitchison."

He was not quite aware of what effect this announcement would produce. But the girl instantly smiled, as if greatly delighted, and thrust out a strong, capable hand which squeezed the professor's delicate fingers with genuine pleasure.

"Bless me!" she exclaimed. "Who'd have thought it? I'm awfully pleased to meet you, Professor. Of course I've read your big book. I bought it as soon as it came

out. I constantly refer to it. Dear me! This is really good —to meet you!"

"Very pleased indeed, I'm sure," murmured the professor. "Er—very kind of you. Are—you are interested in caves?"

"Deeply!" replied the girl. "You see, my father was a geologist, and when he was alive, I used to go about with him, and I got fond of this sort of thing, and, as I said, I've seen all the principal caves in England and most of the important ones in Europe."

"I trust you found my book of use to you?" inquired the professor.

"Oh, yes," said the girl. "Yes, it's an admirable book. But, do you know, I've often thought of writing to you about it, Professor. Indeed, if we hadn't met in this accidental fashion I should have written very soon, because, you know, good as your book is on most points, you're absolutely wrong in some of your theories —absolutely!"

The professor started. For a moment he wondered if all this was a dream. He, the infallible dogmatist, calmly told that he was wrong—and in Wookey Hole! Why, not a single critic had hitherto dared to canvass his theories! Wrong? Impossible! He glanced wonderingly at his companion. But she, evidently a very self-assured young person, was talking again.

"Now, for instance, take this very Wookey Hole, Professor," she continued. "Your twenty-third chapter is almost entirely devoted to it. You remember certain theories that you develop in that chapter? Well, they're all wrong—you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick in several instances. You'll have to modify, and correct, and revise, and in some cases withdraw altogether.

That's what I was going to write to you about. You see, I dare say I know a lot more about Wookey Hole than you do."

"This is either my tenth or eleventh visit," declared the professor with some heat. "And really, my dear young lady——"

"This is about my eleven hundredth visit," interrupted the girl calmly. "My mother and I live close by. And look here, Professor—will you attend to me, and I'll prove to you that your theories about the occupancy of this cave are perfectly untenable?"

Somewhere deep down in the recesses of his character Professor Browne-Mitchison possessed a spark of irascibility; it was never nearer bursting into flame than at this critical moment. But by a determined effort he threw cold water on it, and his otherwise modest and gentle spirit asserted itself.

"I trust that I am not averse to learning," he replied. "If there is anything that you can suggest——"

"Just so," said the self-constituted mentor. "Because after all, there's no man can say that he's said the very last word on any given subject, is there now? Awful ass if he does, anyway, don't you think?"

The professor was not so sure about that. In his own opinion, he had already said several last words on this particular subject.

"I am waiting to be instructed," he answered.

"Very well," continued his companion. "Now, in your book you've said a lot about the Hyæna Den in this Wookey Hole, and its relation to the late Acheulian period. I think you're absolutely wrong in your conclusions, and I'll show you why. To begin with . . ."

During the next hour or so the professor passed

through several mental stages. He was at first inclined to be incredulous and sardonic. Then he became interested, realizing that this brown-eyed damsel knew what she was talking about. Subsequently he became uneasy. A doubt arose in his mind; did he, after all, know quite as much as he had fancied he knew? Eventually, when he and his companion emerged from the cave, he looked at her in the full light of day with a growing curiosity.

"This has been a deeply interesting conversation," he said. "Your theories are well worth considering and following up. I should like to know more of them, and—to whom I am indebted for them?"

"My name is Marchmont," said the girl. "Philippa Marchmont. My mother and I live in the valley down there—you see the gables of our house over there behind the elms. If you are staying in the neighbourhood, Professor, come and lunch with us to-morrow."

"I will certainly do myself that pleasure," replied the professor in his gravest tones. "And in the meantime I will—I will think."

He spent all the rest of that day thinking, and all the evening too, and he was still absorbed in thought when he went to fulfil his engagement next day. Before he left his hostesses, late in the afternoon, he confided to the younger one that he was seriously considering a drastic revision of some of his ideas, and suggested that he and she should make a thorough exploration of Wookey Hole to begin with.

"Your theories about flint culture in the later Palæolithic age are deeply interesting," he remarked. "I should like to pursue them further—much further."

"Nothing easier!" said Miss Marchmont cheerfully.

"Meet me up there to-morrow morning, Professor."

The professor met her. He continued to meet her. They spent whole days together. The week which he had intended to devote to Wookey Hole lengthened into a fortnight. It was a new experience for Professor Browne-Mitchison. He was no longer the teacher, but the taught; he realized that on certain points this young and charming friend knew more than he did. It was all very novel—surprising and disconcerting at first, but infinitely pleasing the further he got into it. At the end of a fortnight he decided to fling Chapter XXIII of his great work to the dogs, and to rewrite it—in accordance with the theories of Miss Philippa Marchmont.

But there was more than that. He felt, vaguely at first, more certainly later, that Miss Marchmont was indispensable to him. And as he stuck his gold horseshoe pin into a very sporty hunting stock one morning he spoke aloud, as if delivering an ultimatum.

"There is but one thing for it!" he said firmly. "One thing only—Matrimony!"

When he met Miss Marchmont an hour or two later he took her hand and led her to a convenient ledge of rock.

"There is a certain thing I wish to say to you," he began, not at all nervously. "Don't you think that as you and I are probably—no, most assuredly!—the two greatest living authorities on our particular subject, and have so very much in common, we—er—don't you think that we owe it to science and the advancement of knowledge to—er—in short, to marry? Eh?"

Miss Marchmont became wholly feminine. But her hand grew warm in the professor's ardent clasp.

"Oh, Professor," she said tremblingly, "I——"

"Come, now!" said the professor. "Now, really—how do you feel about it?"

Miss Marchmont slowly turned her face and regarded him thoughtfully. Eventually she smiled.

"I—I think I feel about it—just as you do!" she answered.

XIV

HIS OWN COUNTRY

When Etherington had come to the top of his fame as a popular novelist whose work was highly esteemed on both sides of the Atlantic it suddenly occurred to him, during a period of idleness, that he might do worse than pay a visit to the village in which he had spent his boyhood. It was a village far away in the north, in the heart of a purely agricultural district; he had lived in it, in the company of a widowed mother and a spinster aunt, from five to fifteen years of age. He retained vivid recollections of it and its people; the village itself had formed the background to more than one of his best-known novels; he had used his remembrance of the village folk to good purpose. But it was now five-and-twenty years since he had set foot in the place, or heard anything of it. Yet it must be there, and doubtless it had changed but little; it had never changed at all during the time in which he lived in it; it was not the sort of place, he thought, that ever would change. Far away from the nearest railroad, miles away from the nearest market town, it was a typical Arcadia, in which people were likely to do in the Twentieth Century what their ancestors had done in the Eighteenth; it was, in short, shut away from the world. Yet he wondered if its people had heard of him, if they knew that the boy had become a famous man. And not being without a

certain pardonable vanity, he determined to go and see.

This adventure was made toward the middle of a particularly genial spring, and it was on a lovely evening in May that Etherington and his portmanteau were carried in a ramshackle fly from the market town to the village. The market town had cheered him; in it nothing had altered as far as he could judge in passing through its cobble-paved streets. Nor had anything changed along the road by which he was driven. There were the old red-roofed farmsteads, orchards on one side, well-filled stackyards on the other, set in the midst of quiet meadows or on the slopes of swelling uplands; there the country houses, half hidden among giant elms; there, at the corners of hills, the windmills which were peculiar to that part of England—big, lighthouse-like erections, with great black sails silhouetted against the sky. And when he came to the village itself there was no visible change in its outward aspect. Here and there, to be sure, a cottage had fallen into ruin, but no new ones had been built to spoil the generally venerable atmosphere. There were the same high beeches and chestnuts, jackdaws chattered about the square gray tower of the old church, women gossiped at the doors, men resting after the day's labour hung over the walls and gates of trim gardens, children played about the green. It was all just as he remembered it, except that in driving along the one long straggling street he did not see a single face that he knew.

That was change—for in his boyhood Etherington had known every man, woman, and child in the village. And it now struck him, for the first time since setting out on his journey, that he had forgotten something—the folk whom he had known as old folk would now be dead; the middle-aged folk would now be old; the chil-

dren would now be grown men and women. Change in the people—yes!—however little or not at all the houses and fields and trees had changed. But presently he came to a first material sign of change. The village was cut clean through by one of the great main highways from London to the north, a highway that had been famous in the old coaching days, and where it was joined by the road along which Etherington had driven from the market town stood an ancient inn, the Marquis of Granby, which he had often described in his stories. He meant to put himself up there; the accommodation, he knew, would be primitive and simple, but there would be clean and well-aired sheets, good beef and bacon, fresh eggs and old ale; he was looking forward to it. But when his fly turned a corner and drew up before the old inn he found that the time spirit had been there. The Marquis of Granby had been rebuilt; it wore an imposing front and looked absurdly ambitious; there were two or three big travelling automobiles drawn up in its yard; the name of the old landlord had gone from the sign, and when Etherington entered its portals it was to encounter a very grand landlady in a silk gown and gold chain and a smart waitress who looked approvingly at the visitor's Savile Row garments. That evening, instead of a high tea of mutton chops and boiled eggs, Etherington sat down to a pretentious dinner, and thereafter, instead of sitting in the bar parlour listening to rustic chatter, he sat in a newly upholstered smoking room amply supplied with road books and motoring literature. Just as the railways had driven all the trade away from the roads seventy years before, so now the motor business was bringing it all back.

Next morning, after breakfast, Etherington strolled

out into the village street. He was what is called a fine figure of a man, and he was punctilious to a degree about his personal appearance. He attracted deep interest and attention as he walked along, looking about him—but it needed no great observation on his part to assure himself that nobody knew him from Adam. Yet, how should they? He was fifteen when he left—scarcely a hobbledehoy—now he was forty. What bothered him was that he knew nobody. Once or twice he thought he recognized faces in cottage doors and at cottage windows, but he was shy and nervous, and scarcely dared to ask. And he had walked the whole length of the village, from the transformed Marquis of Granby at one end to the White Horse Inn at the other, before he saw a face and figure about which he felt certain. Then suddenly he stepped briskly forward and held out his hand to an ancient man who was slowly and laboriously mending the road.

"This is Thomas Travis, I know!" he exclaimed, heartily. "How are you, Thomas?"

The road mender straightened his bent figure with a visible effort, and taking the offered hand, stared wonderingly in its owner's face.

"Why, thankin' you kindly, sir, I'm fair to middlin'," he answered. "Nowt but a bit o' rheumatics, like, sir. But I'm sure I don't know who you may be?"

"Don't you remember Mrs. Etherington, who used to live at West Lodge?" suggested the stranger, "and her son? You used to work in our garden."

The old man opened his eyes and mouth, drew himself back, and stared incredulously.

"Now then, bless my life and soul!" he exclaimed. "Why! it's never Master Guy! Well, I never did! Eh, but you have growed! Why, you were nowt but a slip

of a lad when you left here, and now you're a reight man. And how's your poor mother?"

"Dead—years ago," replied Etherington. "And I suppose most of the old people I knew here are dead, too, eh, Thomas?"

"Aye, there's been a deal o' dead 'uns," assented Thomas. "Deal o' change i' t' place since you wor here. T' owd 'uns is dead, and t' young 'uns is wed, and some o' t' folk has gone elsewheer, and there's new faces i' t' place. An' t' owd squire, he's dead, and his son selled t' estate, and there's been two new parsons and three or four new farmers, and what not. Theer's scarce any o' t' owd lot livin' 'ceptin' me and owd Jane Habbiton. You'll remember her?—she used to wash clothes for your mother."

"I remember Jane," said Etherington. "So she's still alive, is she?"

"Aye, she's live enough!" answered Thomas. "She saved a bit o' brass, like, and retired on it. She lives i' that little thacked cottage by t' church gate—ye owt to call and see her, Master Guy—she's as wick as a scopril, is t' owd jade!"

"I will," assented Etherington. "But she must be very old now."

He talked a little longer with the old man before strolling off in the direction of Jane Habbiton's cottage. He remembered her well enough as a black-eyed woman of middle age, the possessor of a bustling manner and an unusually sharp tongue; he had more than once made professional use of his memories of her; it would be interesting to meet her again. But on his way he passed one of the principal farmsteads of the village; there, at the gate of its trim garden, a man lounged, in whom Etherington recognized a companion of his boyish

days, with whom he had played cricket and robbed birds' nests. He went up to him with outstretched hand.

"You've forgotten me, Will Parker," he said with a smile. "Don't you remember Guy Etherington?"

The farmer took the offered hand, stared, hesitated, and finally smiled.

"Bless my life!" he said. "I—I shouldn't ha' known you." He hesitated again, then glanced at the open door of his house. "Come in!" he continued. "Naught much changed about our place, you'll see."

Nothing was changed in the parlour into which Etherington followed him. There was the same heavy old furniture, the same family portraits in oil—horribly painted by a local artist—the same big family Bible reposing on an ancient bureau; it was as if he had gone twenty-five years back. But there was no longer the burly figure of Parker's father—a formidable person of whom Etherington, as a boy, had always stood in awe.

"I suppose your father is dead?" he said, as he sat down.

"Aye, he's dead," answered Parker unconcernedly. "Died a good piece since. I've had this farm on my own hands nigh on to fifteen year." He walked across to a cupboard, produced a decanter of whisky, a syphon and glasses. "You'll have a taste?" he said suggestively, glancing at his guest from the tail of his eye.

"Thank you," said Etherington. He dimly remembered that it was the custom of that quarter of the world to offer hospitality as soon as a visitor crossed a threshold, no matter at what hour of the day. "Just a drop."

Parker filled the glasses, handed one over, and sitting down in what had been his father's and his grandfather's easy chair, folded his big hands and twiddled his

thumbs. He looked his visitor appraisingly over, and smiled.

"Long time since you were i' these parts," he remarked.

"Twenty-five years," answered Etherington.

"Aye, it'll be all that," said Parker. He smiled again. "And what may you ha' done wi' yourself, like?"

"I've written books," replied Etherington simply.

"Aw!" observed Parker. "Aye? Is there aught to be made out o' that now?"

"Yes," said Etherington, "there is."

Parker twiddled his thumbs again.

"You'll live i' London, no doubt?" he suggested.

"No," replied Etherington. "I've lived for some years in a village in the south—a farming village."

Parker's eyes lighted up. Something like interest rose in his face.

"How did 'taters do your way last year?" he asked. "They did very well wi' us up here—I made nine pound a ton out o' mine."

Etherington talked farming for half an hour, reflecting that it was well for him that he had some knowledge of it and interest in it. He listened sympathetically to Parker's views on wheat and manure and wurzels and wages, and was quick to observe that Parker appreciated him all the more because their ideas coincided, and because he was ready and able to tell of farming conditions in another part of the country. But Parker asked no questions about the writing trade.

He went away at last in search of old Jane Habbiton. Her cottage was easily found—a half-timbered, thatched, ramshackle sort of place that stood between the church-yard lich-gate and the village pound. Like every other cottage in the place, it had a neatly kept,

garden in front of it, and there, leaning on a stick, and surrounded by hollyhocks and sunflowers as tall as herself, was Jane Habbiton. She was a bit bent, but she was not so much changed as he had thought she would be, and when she turned sharply at the sound of his step there was all the alert movement which he remembered as a characteristic of hers in the far-off days.

"Well, Jane, and how are you?" he said, taking her claw-like hand. "You've forgotten me—Guy Etherington. Can you remember now?"

The old woman started and, putting her face close to his, looked long and searchingly at him.

"Lawk-a-massy!" she said at last. "You don't say! Come your ways in! Aye, I remember you. A rare lot o' trouble you've given me many a time. You were a rare 'un for mischief!"

"No doubt!" laughed Etherington. He followed Jane Habbiton into the cottage, where there was a bright fire burning under a black pot, from which came a highly appetizing smell of cooking. "Well," he said, as he sat down and looked round, "you seem to be pretty comfortable, Jane."

"Aw, I'm all right," answered Jane, from an elbow chair by the hearth. "I had t' sense, d'ye see, to put by all t' brass a't I could scrape together. I were none one o' t' sort to spend all I addled, not me. Aye, I been retired this five or six year; there's nobody i' t' place better off nor what I am. An' how's your ma? But I reckon she'll be dead, what?"

"Yes, years ago," replied Etherington.

"And your Auntie Sophia? She were a nice lady, that theer. Happen she's dead, an' all?"

"She is," said Etherington.

Jane Habbiton produced a snuffbox and took a pinch.

"Aye," she said, reflectively. "They all come to t' grave, sooner or later. An' what trade might you be in, like?"

"I write books," answered Etherington.

Jane Habbiton sniffed. The sniff was more expressive than any words could be. She took a second pinch of snuff.

"Aye, well!" she said, after due thought. "I allus did tell your poor ma 'at you'd nivver mak' much out, and 'at it were a good job you'd hev no need to do owt for your livvin'. Ye were t' idlest young varmint 'at ivver I knew! I mind 'at when your ma sent you to t' grammar school theer at Polcaster ye were at home half your time, rampagin' about. Ye used to wander all over t' countryside, same as if you were half soft, starin' at t' sky, an' sich-like. I've said to your ma and your Auntie Sophia many a time, 'Yon theer,' I've said, ''ll never do nowt i' t' world 'at's of any use,' I've said. An' of course book writin's neyther here nor theer. But what's it matter as long as ye've gotten enough brass to live on?—an' I reckon ye've allus had that. Brass is t' main thing, and I hope ye know how to tak' care on it!"

Etherington went away that afternoon. To the big world outside he was the great and particular prophet of that special Arcadia, but it was very evident that the true Arcadians held him in no honour.

XV

NOT IN THE HOUSE

Womersley had come back to England after a self-imposed exile of ten years, and on this, the first day of his return, everything seemed uncomfortably strange to him. He had felt odd and shy and nervous when, at midday, he had stepped ashore at Southampton from a South African liner; it had given him a shock when, some hours later, he had found Waterloo entirely rebuilt; he had been pained when, on driving to the hotel which he had patronized in his younger days, he discovered that its mid-Victorian characteristics had gone, and had been replaced by something that was a hybrid mixture of Paris and New York. All the same, too indifferent to turn elsewhere, he had booked his room under its roof, and in due time had contrived to find his way to one of its many dining salons. It struck him, as he sat down there and glanced furtively at the gay folk around him, that he had never been half as much alone in the desert places which he had cultivated in his ten years' absence as he was at that moment. There was not a man or woman in the place that he knew, nor was there a hand in all London that he longed to clasp, nor an eye that he hungered to meet. And he smiled a little bitterly as he reflected that the solitude which he had quitted nine weeks before was not a tenth part as solitary as that into which a mere matter of business had brought him.

He made an end of his dinner, after the fashion of men who have lived a primitive life, by leaving his table when he had satisfied his precise wants, and sought a smoking room; there was companionship, at any rate, in tobacco. Not that Womersley was hungering after society; he had learned to do without it. But now that he was in the midst of all these millions, a mere unit in the biggest ant heap of the world, he felt that he must do something, if it were only to put a favourite pipe between his teeth.

And so he sat down and smoked, and as he smoked he remembered, digging up the idea from a long way back, that there are things in London of an evening which the loneliest of men can do all alone. There was, for instance, the theatre. He had a dim notion that once upon a time he had been fond of the theatre. Ages ago that was!—he had certainly never entered one since his departure from England. And now there were, of course, theatres close at hand. He hesitated, glancing doubtfully at the clothes which had been made for him, in a great hurry, in Cape Town. Oh, well, no one, he reflected, looking at his bronzed and seamed face and his gnarled hands—more used to carrying a rifle than a carefully rolled umbrella—would take him for a man of fashion, so what did that matter? He picked up a copy of the *Times*, and after some searching found the theatrical advertisements.

A moment later Womersley let the paper drop on his knees, took his pipe from his lips, and, with a queer catching of his breath stared straight in front of him, as if at nothing. In reality he was looking back—what he had just read had brought up the dead past. And presently he muttered to himself:

"My God!—after all these years! And yet—it must be—it is, of course!"

Then, lifting up the paper again, he once more read over the announcement that had moved him out of his usual stolidity of manner:

CORINTHEUM THEATRE
To-night MR. MARLEY BRADWARDINE Presents
(for the first time on any stage)
THE DEAR DEAD DAYS
BY JOHN NEMO

There was more of it, in the shape of names of actors and actresses, but Womersley gave small attention to these particulars. What he read, and read over again, and still again, was the name of the author and the title of the play. For he was John Nemo, and the play was his own.

He sat back in his chair after a while and tried to remember everything. It required a lot of mental effort, for he had long since put the whole thing out of his mind, as of an incident closed and gone for ever. And even now he could not accurately recollect all the details. But this much he did bring to the surface. Years before—he was not sure how many years, but it was two or three before his departure from England—he had tried his hand at writing a romantic play, had caused the result of his labours to be typed, had put an assumed name on the outer cover, and had handed in his parcel at the office of the Corintheum, with a note in which he politely asked Mr. Marley Bradwardine, its lessee and manager, if he approved the play, to communicate with its author through the Personal Column of the *Times*. After that Womersley had glanced along the appointed column every day for a year or two, but he had never seen any request from Mr. Bradwardine that John Nemo should materialize. And then Womersley

had experienced the great trouble of his life—a love affair—and had removed himself as far as possible from civilization in order to forget, and—the whole thing had dropped into the dark pools of as-if-it-never-had-been. But now here he was back in England, and it was the night of his offspring's birth.

He remained fixed to his chair some time longer, miserably undecided whether he should go to the Corintheum or—stay where he was and go to bed. After all, the man who wrote the play was not the man who had just come back to England. He remembered the writer of the play as something young, ardent, hopeful, filled with all sorts of ideas and enthusiasms; the man who now sat there thinking was under no illusions, had seen life naked and death at close quarters, and had exchanged enthusiasm for reserve and hope for silence. What had one to do with the other? What had the man of thirty-seven to do with the lad of five-and-twenty?

But in the end Womersley got out of that chair, and out of the smoking room, and out of the hotel. As if in a dream, he found himself being driven to the Corintheum; he was still in a dream when, a little later, he also found himself in a stall. Perhaps the people who sat near him wondered why the big, broad-shouldered, hard-bitten-looking man showed such extraordinary absorption in the play; why he sat, never looking to left or right, but only at the things in front. Perhaps they thought him some man from the backwoods who had never seen a play before and was fascinated. But whatever his neighbours thought, there sat Womersley among them as if spellbound, until the first act came to an end amid what he felt to be hearty and genuine applause.

He started then, as if coming out of a deep sleep, and stared stupidly about him. The lights were up, and when he saw the women's gowns and the men's clothes his first instinct was to glance at his Cape Town-made dress suit and wonder, for the second time that evening, if it was all right. But his mind soon passed to other matters. What did people do between the acts—men, anyway? He remembered at last that in his old theatre-going days he had usually gone out between the acts and had had a cigarette, and a drink, and a chat. There was nobody to chat with now, and he had no inclination for a drink, nor for a cigarette, but he was longing for a cigar, even if he only smoked two inches of it. And presently he was in a place crowded with men, and, like most of them, smoking, and nobody took or seemed to take any notice of him. He lighted a cigar, thrust his hands in his pockets, and stared stupidly at his feet. A man's voice close by struck on his ear.

"Good play!—excellent play!—money in it!—if this first act's anything to go by," the man was saying. "Most extraordinary thing how Bradwardine got hold of it! Heard about that?"

"No," said another voice. "How? Something unusual?"

Womersley, with the stealth of one trained to bush craft, slightly moved, and took an eye-corner glance at the conversationalists. He set them down as men of the theatrical profession, and he kept his ears open to this half-whispered talk.

"Extremely unusual!" replied the first. "Bradwardine told me all about it himself. Some twelve years or so ago somebody left this play at his office—you know how these things are rained in on a manager. There was a note with the script asking Bradwardine, if

he approved the play, to communicate with its author through the Personal Column of the *Times*. Queer notion, but there it was. Well, Bradwardine tells me he put script and note into some drawer or other, and——"

"And forgot all about 'em," interrupted the other man with a cynical laugh. "Never opened the parcel, no doubt."

"I believe something of the sort did happen," agreed the first speaker. "Anyhow, it lay there, wherever he put it, for years and years. Then, about two years ago, Bradwardine was going through a register of things sent in to him, and he came across the title of this. It rather fetched him, and he caused a search to be made, and found both play and note. Then he read the play, and thought no end of it, and so he advertised for John Nemo; not once or twice, but, he swears, a hundred times. No good. John Nemo never came forward."

"Dead, no doubt," said the second man laconically.

"Probably," assented the first man. "But Bradwardine certainly did his best to find him. There was the address of a typewriting office on the script; he went there. They unearthed somebody there who remembered that years ago a smart young fellow—big swell, she called him—brought a manuscript there, asked for it to be typed, called for it a fortnight later, paid for the typing, and carried it off. That was this play, but as to the identity of its author they knew nothing, for he had never given them a name. And then Bradwardine made up his mind to produce; if the author was alive, he said, he'd turn up. For, mind you, Bradwardine's a keen hand, and he knew this thing would go!"

"Seems like it, judging it so far," said the second man. "That first act's good, real stuff."

A bell rang. The men about him began to move;

Womersley moved too, more slowly than the others. He was feeling more curiously dream-like than ever; it seemed to him that this was as if he had been dead a long, long time, and had suddenly come back to hear people talking about him. Eventually he wandered away to his seat; the curtain went up again.

All through that second act Womersley sat as apparently spellbound as during the first. He never took his eyes off the men and women on the stage; his ears lost no syllable of the words they spoke. He was living it all over again, gathering up threads, remembering old impulses, digging out old enthusiasms. And, after all, this, all this, was his—his creation! He felt like a man who has brought a child into the world, left it at his birth, gone away for a long span of years, and come back to find it grown and great, a man—yet his!

When the curtain fell on the second act, amid greater applause than before, Womersley remained in his stall. The lights went up. He looked curiously at the folk about him, at the men, the women; he listened to such conversation as reached his ears; it was evident that everybody was pleased. And suddenly, for the first time since he had taken his place, he realized that he was sitting next to a little old gentleman who, like himself, was unaccompanied. The little old gentleman turned to him, eyeing him a little doubtfully, as if not quite certain of his company.

"Good play!" he said.

"Yes," answered Womersley, with transparent simplicity.

"Fresh!" continued his neighbour. "Fresh! That's what I like about it. I've been seeing plays in London for —Lord knows how many years!—and you can sort 'em into parcels and label them! But this—this is original—

fresh, as I say. Air of youth about it. I should say its author, whoever he may be, is a young man."

"Yes," assented Womersley, mechanically. "Yes—a young man."

"Wonder who he is?" said the little old gentleman, with a chuckle. He looked round at the tiers of boxes. "Suppose he's in the house somewhere. Clever chap, anyhow."

Womersley made no reply. The curtain went up again, and the theatre settled down to the third and last act. All through that he sat, more absorbed than ever—he was remembering how he had put his heart into it. . . .

It was all over at last, and Womersley, coming out of his dream-like state to a sharp apprehension of actualities, sat listening to the storms of applause which came, unchecked and unqualified, from all parts of the theatre. He watched, curiously interested, while the leading actor was called and recalled; while the lesser lights received their due meed of approbation; he even found himself joining in the applause. But, in spite of his innate stolidity, he started as a shout went up from somewhere behind him:

"Author! Author!"

The little old gentleman at Womersley's right hand gave a big chuckle.

"Now then!" he said.

He was looking toward a corner of the curtain; everybody was looking; Womersley looked, too. It seemed a long, long time before there was any response; during that time the demands for the author's appearance grew more and more insistent and clamorous. At last there was a movement, and over the crowded theatre a dead silence.

The next instant Bradwardine was standing before

the curtain—a handsome, elderly man, whose presence was well known to every ardent London theatregoer. He was usually a man of a pleasant, ready smile, but now his face was curiously serious. And when he spoke his tone was strangely grave and his words mysteriously brief.

"Ladies and gentlemen! The author is not in the house!"

In the dead silence that followed, Womersley, for the first time for many a long year, completely lost his head. Before he realized what he was doing he had risen to his feet; his tall, somewhat gaunt figure and hard-bitten face appeared, dominant and compelling, high above the crowded rows of the stalls. As if impelled by some force that flung wide all resistance, he stretched out a hand and a pointing finger toward Bradwardine. And he heard his own voice—harsh, cynical, half-mocking:

"Wrong! He *is* in the house! *I* am the author!"

He could have bitten out his tongue as soon as he had spoken, so quickly did the sudden, uncontrollable impulse die away. But he had spoken, and all around him broke out a babel of confused sound—a sharp exclamation from the little old gentleman at his elbow; whispers, murmurs, laughter; it culminated, as he stood grim, defiant, in a rapidly rising wave of enthusiastic applause. And in the middle of that he saw Bradwardine making pantomimic gestures to a uniformed attendant who stood near. The man comprehended, and came wonderingly toward Womersley.

"Will you come behind, sir?" he whispered. "This way, sir."

Muttering a hearty if subdued curse upon himself, and disregarding the people who were already stretching congratulatory hands toward him, Womersley stumbled his way out of the stalls and followed the

attendant. He was glad when a door opened and he found himself in a long, dimly lighted passage. But at the end of it he had to cross the stage; the curtain, to be sure, was down, but the men and women who had just so successfully presented his work were gathered there—to stare at him. He walked through them, looking neither to right nor left, and suddenly he was in the manager's room, and there was Bradwardine, cool and collected, and eminently watchful.

Womersley pulled himself erect and gave Bradwardine a sharp, direct look.

"Sorry," he said, "I oughtn't to have done that. Set me down for an ass!"

The manager stared, reflected, and suddenly broke out into one of his charming smiles.

"Not at all, my dear sir," he answered. "A little surprising and unusual, but—you are what you claim to be?"

Womersley pulled out a card—one of several on which, in an idle moment before dinner, he had pencilled the name of his hotel. He thrust it into Bradwardine's hand.

"My name and my present address," he said. "As for the rest, why of course I'm the author of this thing. Much obliged to you, too, for all the trouble you've taken about it. But I forget—naturally, you want proof. Well, listen——"

At the end of five minutes Bradwardine thrust out a hand and took a firm grip of Womersley's right elbow.

"My dear sir," he said. "Delighted! This is magnificent! Superb! And the audience, still lingering and still clamorous. This way at once!"

But Womersley dragged back from the persuading fingers.

"You want me to—to step in front of that curtain?" he said. "No! I'm not going to!"

"But, my good sir——" began Bradwardine.

"I'm not going to," repeated Womersley. "They've seen me. I'm off. Not in my line, that sort of thing, now. No!"

He snatched up his hat and overcoat, made through the open door, and, catching sight of a passage which obviously led to some side street, fled away down it. A moment later he was outside and in a taxicab, hungering for the privacy of his hotel. There, at any rate, nobody would know him. And very soon, in a corner of the smoking room, he cursed his sudden impulse once more, and wondered what on earth had made him lose his nerve and his head so completely.

Then he was aware of the presence of one of the hall porters—a man who looked inquiringly at him and presented three cards.

"Mr. Womersley, sir?" he asked. "Some gentlemen very anxious to see you, sir—newspaper gentlemen, I think, sir—said they'd followed you on from the Corintheum Theatre, and would you be kind enough to give them a few——"

Womersley growled as he picked up and looked at the cards. Mr. This from the *Daily Monitor;* Mr. That from the *Daily Planet;* Mr. Another from the *Daily Sentinel.* He sat up in his big chair and gave the hall porter a glance the significance of which was unmistakable.

"Look here!" he said. "You tell these chaps that I'm just going to bed, and that I couldn't see the King himself if he called at this time! Flat! Perhaps, to-morrow morning. Anyway—send 'em off!"

To prove his words, Womersley went to bed there and then. And in the wakeful hours of the night he had

a vision of the wild solitudes that he had come to know and love, of the life alone with nature, of vast skies and mighty distances; he knew them now, and all they meant, and all that they had made him. The City or the Wild—which?

In the morning, when the newspaper men came, mightily inquisitive and strongly reinforced, Womersley and his baggage had vanished. Neither they nor Bradwardine saw him any more.

XVI

A FORTY-TO-ONE CHANCE

ALTHOUGH not even his most intimate associates were aware of it, Salcombe was very nearly at the end of his tether. Possibly his bankers knew of this, or guessed at it, but even they had no means of being sure, for Salcombe was an essentially deep, silent, and reserved young man, who was as likely as not to keep more than one banking account. Despite the fact that he was only three and twenty, he was as enigmatic as the Sphinx, and just as difficult to get anything out of—an odd, solitary sort of chap, who, though he belonged to a well-known sporting club, and was never off its premises except when he was away at race meetings, rarely opened his lips, however keenly he used his eyes and ears. But though nobody else knew Salcombe really and fundamentally, Salcombe knew himself, and much more about himself than he would have liked anyone else to know. He knew that his parents had died when he was young, and that he had spent his boyhood and first years of young manhood at a school which he loathed or with guardians whom he detested. He knew that on his twenty-first birthday he had come into absolute and uncontrolled possession of some sixty thousand pounds. And on a certain September morning two years later—the exact date on which he made this discovery was September 2, 1901—he knew that all he had left of it was a very good wardrobe, a considerable

collection of *Ruff's Guide* and similar classical works, some excellent racing prints, and about fifteen hundred pounds in ready money. All the rest had gone—gradually, but surely—into the deep pockets of various bookmakers.

It was a strange thing that even by that time Salcombe had not lost faith in himself. From fifteen years of age upward he had always had a passion for gambling: it was in his blood. But the passion was strictly confined to the turf. Salcombe scarce knew the Knave of Hearts from the Queen of Diamonds, and he had never felt the slightest itching for the sights and sounds of Monte Carlo. His mania was to back horses; the big bookmakers soon came to know this apparently saturnine young man as a bold, daring, and heavy punter. And during his first year on the turf Salcombe had a good and successful time; when, returning homeward from the Cambridgeshire, he reckoned up his accounts, he found that he had added some thirty thousand pounds to his original capital. If he had only kept away from racing over the sticks that following winter—but he didn't. He lost a lot of money in following his fancies about certain promising 'chasers, and when the legitimate season came round again he was keen to get it back. Unfortunately, he did not get it back; instead, he threw a lot more money after it. He dropped a small fortune in the early days of that season of 1901. Newmarket hit him badly; he had worse luck at Epsom. The tide turned at Ascot, but he went home from Goodwood a heavy loser—not one nibble out of Fortune's cake had been doled out to him. And now here he was, within a week of the Doncaster September meeting, and he only had fifteen hundred pounds. Clearly something had got to be done.

Salcombe spent a whole day in seriously considering

what that something ought to be. He had always had curiously pig-headed notions about racing—or, rather, about his own methods of betting. A proficient in the game could easily have told him that unless he was blessed with the most phenomenal and extraordinary luck his methods were as likely to be fatal as they were certainly foolish. They were very simple, these methods—simple in more senses than one. From the beginning of his career Salcombe had liked to pick out some particular one of various entrants and then back it—not for what it was worth, but for a good deal of what he was worth. There is excitement in that, but he is a lucky man who can spot one winner out of five, and Salcombe's percentage in that fatal season had not materialized to even that extent. But he was obstinate in believing that luck will turn; nevertheless, the knowledge that his money had now dwindled to an insignificant amount made him reflect more soberly than had been his wont, and at the end of his day of continuous thought he made up his mind as to his next adventure. Out of his remaining capital he would risk a thousand pounds on some one of the horses entered for the St. Leger on the following Wednesday. It was now or never, neck or nothing, a final cast of the die. If he won, he won—and then he could think again. If he lost, well, he would still have five hundred pounds, and he would take it and clear out to Canada.

The next thing was what to back? Here again Salcombe, to put it plainly, was pig-headedly obstinate. He had no love for short prices. If he had consistently backed undeniably good horses all through the flat-racing season he might have done reasonably well, and even kept his original capital fairly intact. But Salcombe had an almost insane liking for long odds—the only times

when he was seen thoroughly to enjoy himself were those wherein some rank outsider upset everybody's calculations; if he himself happened to have backed it, his enjoyment of the situation developed into openly manifested delight. And although he now settled down to a thoughtful consideration of chances and prospects, he knew well enough that in the end he would stick to his old tactics, and pick out his horse from mere whim or caprice. That, fatal as it had been for some time past, was inevitable.

But which horse? There were likely to be some twelve to fifteen starters. Out of these one stood preëminently —Volodyovski. Volodyovski had won the Derby that year. Volodyovski, so to speak, was the horse of the year; he would start, sure as fate, at odds on in the St. Leger. That put him clean out of Salcombe's reckonings; Salcombe had never had anything to do with such prices; he had never once backed a horse at even money. He ruled out Volodyovski there and then—favourites, hot as they might be, were not in his line. But the rest? —there were plenty of them, but in popular estimation they came a long way behind the winner of the Derby. There were Jacobite II and Fortunatus, Veronese and Revenue; after these four there was a ruck, and out of that ruck Salcombe, after his usual fashion, wanted to find something at a long price. But at the end of his day of speculation and surmise he was still asking himself the question—which?

If a sane and experienced person had been permitted to assist at Salcombe's mental exercisings he would have suggested that Salcombe would do just as well if he scribbled the names of the likely starters on as many scraps of paper, flung the scraps into his hat, and drew one out. But that was not Salcombe's way—he was

waiting until inspiration, brilliant and convincing, came to him. Like most men who give themselves up to the excitement and fascination of the turf, he was incurably superstitious, and believed in sudden suggestions; he was still waiting for one when, on the Monday morning of the fateful week, he betook himself to Doncaster and put himself up at his usual house, the Angel. He kept his ears open during that afternoon and evening, and again next day, at the opening of the meeting, and in the assembly and subscription rooms, but when morning broke on the Wednesday, the day of the big race, he was still undecided as to which particular horse was going either to make or break him; the brilliant inspiration had not arrived. Salcombe saw that dawn. He had gone to bed early the night before, so that he might be up early; he wanted to see as much as he could of the morning gallops of the competing animals. And while most of the Doncaster townfolk were still snoring in their beds he was away up the High Street to the Town Moor. The wide-thrown moor itself was veiled in September morning mists when he got to it; mist curled white and ghostly about the stately elms that fringe the Great North Road; the furze bushes in the distance were hidden from view, the rifle butts obscured; the towering lines of the grandstand showed but faintly. But the sun was struggling through the mist above the Sandal Woods, and as its beams broke up the clinging wreaths that circled across the levels Salcombe was aware of shapes that presently materialized as men and horses.

He had hung about for an hour or two—watching, speculating, wondering—when he was aware of two small boys, schoolboys, evidently of horsey proclivities, who leaned against a rail, hands in pockets, debating.

A remark in a shrill, piping voice drew Salcombe's attention.

"I know what will win the Selliger this afternoon!" said the voice, with cocksure emphasis. "I know! Doricles 'll win—dead cert."

"G'on away!" retorted the other boy. "Doricles won't be in it! Volodyovski'll win—bet you what you like!"

"Doricles 'll win," affirmed the cocksure one. "My father says Doricles 'll win; he's given me a sovereign to put on Doricles. D'you think my father doesn't know?"

The boys moved off, disputing, and Salcombe went away toward the town, intent on breakfast. He thought hard as he strode down Bennitthorpe and into the waking streets. Doricles!—somehow he had never thought much about Doricles. Doricles was a rank outsider, next to nowhere in the betting. You could get almost anything you liked about Doricles. True, Doricles was intimately related to the popular Volodyovski; they were, in fact, by the same father, Florizel II—Doricles out of Rosalie, Volodyovski out of La Reine. But Doricles to win? Win!—was this the brilliant inspiration?

Salcombe spent the morning in his usual fashion—in more or less silent moving in and out of the betting circles and haunts of the gray old town. But when, near noon, he set out for the Town Moor and the great business of the day he was still undecided. Then the inspiration on which he set such store came in his way again. Under the high elms beyond the old Rockingham Inn a mangy individual, who had got himself up in a jockey's cast-off costume, had gathered a ring of open-mouthed rustics around him and was offering to sell them, for sixpence each, twisted bits of dirty paper, on every one of

which was inscribed a sure and certain tip. He was a voluble rogue, and he winked knowingly at Salcombe and his smart clothes and field glass. And Salcombe flung him a half crown in recognition of the wink, and had one of the bits of paper thrust into his hand with a fervent blessing. He laughed, and was about to throw it away—then he opened it and glanced at the vile writing. Doricles!

The born gambler's superstition welled up hot and strong in Salcombe; for the second time that morning he had seen a direct finger post set up before him. By the time he mingled with the crowd in the exclusive and particular ring which he favoured nine tenths of the gross amount of his inclination were centred on Doricles. He moved about, waiting, watching, listening. The big men with whom he usually did business, and who were unaware that his balance was down to fifteen hundred pounds, eyed him expectantly, knowing that before the big race came off Salcombe would be up to his usual game of heavily backing some comparative outsider. But Salcombe kept away from them, or, if he went near them, gave them no more than a dark and silent nod. He was still ruminating, considering, screwing himself up.

The time filtered away till within twenty, fifteen, ten minutes of the St. Leger, and he had done nothing. But his sharp ears had gathered in all the details of the market. Volodyovski was settling down at 6 to 5 on; Revenue was receding from 9 to 1 to 100 to 8; you could get 10 to 1 about Jacobite II and Fortunatus; Veronese lengthened to 100 to 8; 1000 to 40 was being offered about Pietermaritzburg. And Doricles in the last few minutes was an easy 40 to 1 chance. Forty to 1! Well, then . . .

Outwardly as cool as a cucumber and as calm as a

summer morning, Salcombe suddenly moved toward the men with whom he did his business, and who, in their time, had profited largely by doing it. A curt word or two, a little pencilling in memorandum books, and it was done. Salcombe, as he lounged away, stood to win forty thousand pounds, and, incidentally, to lose precisely two thirds of all he had in the world. And now for —Doricles!

That St. Leger of 1901 was the first at which the then new-fangled starting gate was ever used. The animals thus introduced to it showed some aversion. Aïda backed under it, launched out, and kicked it; Syneros and Fortunatus threw away their good manners. But at last they got away, Revenue leading, and Cynical, Fortunatus, and Volodyovski coming behind, with the rest of the runners in a pack at the rear. Salcombe took small notice of that first bit of the race—he cared little where the dark blue jacket and yellow cap figured then, so long as they came out clear and distinct at the end. But when the rapidly moving mass had covered the hill and come to the rifle butts he looked more closely and with more interest. There was a lilac jacket and white cap in front then; that was Cynical, and behind him was his stable companion, Fortunatus, and Doricles was right away in the rear. Then, as they came to the straight, Cynical faded away, dropping back, and amid a great roar from the crowd far down the course the favourite came to the front, followed by four or five horses, out of whom Salcombe suddenly managed to pick out Doricles. At the bend Revenue came out of the group again, and with Veronese, Volodyovski, and Doricles went racing on to the distance. And then the thing happened that made Salcombe's heart thump for the first time, and sent the colour out of his cheeks,

and made his fingers close convulsively round his field glass. For out of the front rank came the blue jacket and yellow cap, first at last for the first time, and neck by neck, but yet a shade behind, came the Eton blue and brown cap of Volodyovski. Amid that roar of the northern crowd, which no man who has heard it will ever forget, the race, the real race, was here at last, and between two horses, and two only, and . . .

A man at Salcombe's elbow suddenly let out a sharp exclamation.

"My God!—the favourite's done. Doricles!"

Another second—another—and the dark blue and the Eton blue flashed past the post together, as it would have seemed to the unknowing. But the sharp eyes around Salcombe knew, and the man at his elbow dropped his glass with a little sigh.

"Doricles—a neck!" he said.

And, with a queer sort of smile, he lifted his hand and yawned—yawned as if he had suddenly turned sleepy. He glanced, still smiling queerly, at Salcombe. But Salcombe was staring across the heads of the crowd in front, watching. Then the numbers went up—12—14—5. Doricles, Volodyovski—Revenue. It was over; he had won forty thousand pounds.

Salcombe dropped his field glass to the length of its strap. He looked round at the chattering, excited men in the ring. One of the men with whom he had done business a few minutes before caught his eye and gave him a humorous wink. Salcombe permitted himself to grin in response. Come off? Yes, it had come off, and . . . but at that he plunged a hand into his pocket, drew out his cigar case, and felt for his matches. And then he suddenly noticed that his right hand was quivering, and in a fashion that he had never known before. But he lighted

his cigar. And as he flung down the match and set his heel on it a swift, sudden murmur arose round about him, and swelled, and mounted to a confused uproar.

"Objection! Objection to Doricles! Bumping!"

Salcombe's teeth bit clean through that cigar. Objection? In the very moment of triumph? His winnings to be snatched away from his grasp at . . . He flung the cigar away with a muttered curse, and, losing his phlegm at the same instant, began excitedly to push his way through the crowd of arguing and vociferous men toward the room where the stewards were already hearing the evidence as to the objection. He pushed on stubbornly, doggedly. . . .

In the next few minutes Salcombe lived through a lifetime. When he had fought his way to as near to the stewards' room as he could get, and was wedged in among a mass of men eager as himself for the verdict he stood with bent head and downcast eyes, staring at the pattern of a man's coat, waiting—waiting. He felt morally sick—very soon it brought on a feeling of physical sickness; his head burned; as for his heart, it seemed to be standing still. And it seemed to him, too, as if ages and ages had passed before there was a sudden burst of cheering from outside the door of the room wherein his fate was being settled.

"All right!" shouted a man in front. "Objection overruled! Doricles wins!"

Salcombe made a superhuman effort, and discovered, to his intense surprise, that he was breathing. Somebody at his elbow made some remark to him. He stared blankly at the man, pushed past him, pushed his way out of the ring, got away through the stand, and, as if he were turning his back on something for ever, marched off townward. The mangy tipster whom he had en-

countered on his way to the course was lounging under the elms in Bennitthorpe, and touched his old jockey cap. Never stopping in his stride, Salcombe pulled a couple of sovereigns from his pocket and flung them in the fellow's direction. He heard a string of blessings, and fervent hopes for his continual good luck to follow him, and he laughed—and was suddenly frightened at the sound of his own laughter.

An hour later Salcombe had packed his kit, paid his bill, drunk a bottle of champagne, and was in the train for King's Cross. On the following Monday he settled his affairs with his friends the bookmakers, lodged his forty thousand pounds in the bank, and disappeared from his usual haunts. In due time his old cronies grew accustomed to his disappearance. Some of them, perhaps occasionally wonder what became of Salcombe. They may be interested to know. Salcombe, after a brief period of recuperation from his nerve shock, thought a good deal. He then married a demure, pretty, and eminently sensible young governess. They settled down in a comfortable house in a Midland village. They have three excellently behaved, handsome children. Salcombe is a churchwarden, and the most model man between Thames and Trent. He plays golf, and he takes his boy to all the county cricket matches; now and then he is seen looking on, interested and admiring, at a meet of fox hounds. A quiet gentleman of sporting tastes, Salcombe, in the estimation of his neighbours. But no one ever hears him talk about horse racing, nor sees him at even a point-to-point fixture. If anybody ever so much as mentions horse racing in Salcombe's presence Salcombe feels sick. Not in a hurry will Salcombe forget the suspense which he suffered while the Doncaster stewards were considering the objection to Doricles.

XVII

THE HIGH TOBY

To THE modern and up-to-date actress, publicity, of the widest and most comprehensive sort, is the chiefly important asset of the necessary stock in trade, and when Miss Morton-Ferriby went into management on her own account she could truthfully boast that she was as well known as any woman in England, inside or outside her own profession. There were good reasons for it. She was a very beautiful young woman. Her figure was perfect; her face, if not quite as faultless as her figure, had charm and vivacity; her eyes exceeded her person in perfection. She so managed things as to let these attractions be known to the widest circles. Many ladies confine themselves to London; Miss Morton-Ferriby during her twenty-eight years of life had had her mother wit sharpened so keenly as to know better. London, in her opinion, was as parochial as any market town in a purely agricultural district—there were narrownesses there as everywhere else. Miss Morton-Ferriby's idea of fame and popularity was to be as well known in Glasgow as in London, in Manchester as in Birmingham. She approved the notion of the shrewd divine who claimed the whole world as his parish. And so, when she founded the quickly famous Morton-Ferriby Company, her plans were for a short and brilliant season in town, at one of the leading West End theatres, and after that an equally brilliant campaign

through the provinces, from Eastbourne to Edinburgh. The thing worked like a charm, and after three years' repetition of it Miss Morton-Ferriby could proudly claim that she was known, loved, and admired by thousands and thousands of regular theatregoers who would never have heard of or seen her had she confined her brilliancies to the neighbourhood of Shaftesbury Avenue. In two score highly important English towns and cities the annual visit of Miss Morton-Ferriby (whose Christian name was Helena) was looked for as the theatrical event of the year.

Naturally, a great many things about Miss Morton-Ferriby began to be known. It added piquancy to her personality that she was neither married nor promised in marriage. She was celebrated as a passionate lover of the chase, and would be seen out with the Pytchley at intervals during the hunting season; her habits and appointments were the despair of all the other women. Then she was a proficient with the foils, and carried a plus handicap at golf. Altogether she was the sort of young woman who turns naturally to sport and athletics. And, in her touring of this country, she was known to cover the distances between one town and another in her own luxurious limousine, and to drive it herself. Wherever Miss Morton-Ferriby wound up on a Saturday night, crowds assembled outside her hotel on the Sunday morning, eager to see the charming and vivacious lady drive off, a smart maid her only companion, to the scene of her next engagement. Sometimes Miss Morton-Ferriby made a considerable detour on these week-end flittings, and would be lost to sight in some out-of-the-way roadside inn for the Sunday evening and night; sometimes she went straight ahead. But it was well known that, however and wherever she

went, it was always by car; railway trains, even when fitted with specially reserved saloons, were Miss Morton-Ferriby's pet aversion.

There was another thing known about Miss Morton-Ferriby—wherever she went, and wherever she appeared she carried with her, and always wore on the stage whatever character she represented, her famous diamonds. There was no great difficulty about fitting in the diamonds to any of her parts. Miss Morton-Ferriby's specialty was the society woman. She was the sort designed by Nature to show off in magnificent dresses in luxurious surroundings—the diamonds came in splendidly. Ill-natured folk said that lots of people went to the theatre when Miss Morton-Ferriby was there only for the purpose of seeing her dresses and her diamonds; had that been true, Miss Morton-Ferriby would have remarked in her calmest tones, that it didn't matter, so long as they paid for their seats. She liked people to see her diamonds; everybody knew she had them. And everybody knew, too, that she was inordinately fond of them; and those folk who, in various provincial towns, from long practice, had grown accustomed to seeing her set out in her big car of a Sunday morning, knew that the small, compact, black-morocco-covered box which she carried in her left hand as she tripped down the steps of the hotels, smiling generously on the admiring bystanders, contained the glittering things that were said to be worth at least fifty thousand pounds. The more knowing ones, winking at each other, said that that morocco box was firmly padlocked to its owner's slender left wrist by a steel chain, and that in the right-hand pocket of her travelling coat Miss Morton-Ferriby carried a small but eminently business-like revolver, always ready for service.

On a certain Saturday night in October Miss Morton-Ferriby wound up a particularly brilliant fortnight's visit to the Theatre Royal, Newcastle-on-Tyne, a city wherein she was a great favourite, and on Sunday morning, about ten o'clock, amid the respectful murmurs and admiring glances of a crowd of devotees, she set off in her car for Edinburgh, where she was due to open the next day. It was a beautiful autumn morning, and Miss Morton-Ferriby had laid her plans for its enjoyment, and for the mellow afternoon that was likely to succeed. She would go leisurely along as far as Berwick-on-Tweed, an old town for which she had a great love; there she would lunch, there she would spend an hour or two; when she was tired of lounging about Berwick she would resume her journey toward Edinburgh, timing herself to arrive at that bewitching hour, neither afternoon nor evening, when the setting sun gilds the Edinburgh smoke and makes the old city a fairy thing. She was in great good temper that morning and full of life, and the keen air that swept across the Northumbrian headlands lent an added colour to her cheeks and new light to her eyes; her maid, who knew her at close quarters and considered her the most beautiful woman in the world, thought she had never seen her looking half so well.

All went successfully with Miss Morton-Ferriby and her maid and the limousine until many miles of the road to Berwick had been covered, and they had reached a point between Belford and Beal. There they came into a particularly lonely stretch of highway; there was scarcely a village in view, and then only well off the road; the isolated farmsteads and cottages were few and far between. But there were glorious views on either hand; on the left the long, romantic lines of the Cheviots, on

the right the gray North Sea and the ruins on Holy Island. Miss Morton-Ferriby was admiring these, and the maid was thinking of the hot lunch which they would get at Berwick, when, rounding a corner of the road, they saw, immediately in front of them, in the middle of the highway, a young man who held up his hand, signalling them to stop. Close by, leaning against the fence on the wayside, was a motor bicycle.

Miss Morton-Ferriby was as generous as she was unsuspicious. Here, evidently, was a fellow motorist, though a humble one, in distress. She slowed down and pulled up. The young man came toward her side of the car, withdrawing his right hand from the pocket of his coat. The hand was slowly raised as he drew near, and to her infinite amazement Miss Morton-Ferriby found herself looking into the ugly and suggestive barrel of a revolver. She was not of the sort that scream, and she did not scream now; the maid did that for her, sharply and on the instant.

"Stop that, Felice!" commanded Miss Morton-Ferriby. "That's no good!" She stared angrily at the young man behind the revolver, her face as red as if he had thrown some insult at her. "What on earth do you mean?" she said. "What is this?"

The assailant smiled—and Miss Morton-Ferriby for the first time felt a sense of fear. That was a smile such as she had never seen. There was some impudence—good-natured impudence—in it, and there was also a sense of humour, as if this had been a stage situation—but there was also a sense of complete assurance, denoting that the young man felt himself to be master of the situation. And—he was a very good-looking, well-groomed, gentlemanly young man, which—so it seemed to his principal captive—made things all the worse.

"What is it?" he said. "Quite a simple matter, Miss Morton-Ferriby. This is a hold-up!"

Miss Morton-Ferriby gasped. Her hands slid from the wheel.

"Keep your right hand out of that pocket!" said the young man, sternly. "No trifling with that revolver of yours!"

"I—I haven't got a revolver!" faltered Miss Morton-Ferriby. "Upon my soul and honour, I haven't! People say I carry one, but I don't. Honour bright!"

"Put your hands on that wheel again, anyway," commanded the assailant. "And let your maid keep hers in sight, too. Now—business! I want those diamonds!"

"My diamonds!" exclaimed Miss Morton-Ferriby. She looked him up and down, feigning intense surprise. "You—you aren't a—a thief?" she said. "You!—a gentleman!" A faint flush stole over the gentleman's features. But his eyes were as hard as ever, and his lips firmer than before.

"Needs must when the devil drives!" he answered. "Better gentlemen than I am have found it necessary to take a purse before to-day. This is what they used to call going on the High Toby! The only difference is that instead of a spirited nag I have a very good motor bicycle. Now, come—the diamonds!"

"You would rob a woman?" said Miss Morton-Ferriby, with simulated scorn. "A hard-working woman, too!"

"If a woman, however hard-working, is so foolish as to carry fifty thousand pounds' worth of diamonds about with her on the King's highway," remarked the young man, "and to let that fact be known, what can

she expect to meet with but a highwayman? I'm the highwayman—so stand and deliver!"

"I haven't fifty thousand pounds' worth of diamonds," said Miss Morton-Ferriby. "If people like to say I have, I can't help it. They're not worth twenty thousand."

"That will do for me very well indeed," retorted the highwayman. "I looked them over very carefully last night—that is, as well as I could from the stalls—and I reckoned them to be worth about what you say. Of course, I shan't realize anything like that on them. But no more trifling. Hand over that case!"

Miss Morton-Ferriby looked up the road and down the road. Her captor smiled.

"Hopeless!" he said. "All the country folk are at their Sunday dinner, and there's small chance of anybody coming along just now. I selected this spot carefully."

"You really mean to rob me?" pleaded Miss Morton-Ferriby. She would have forced tears into her beautiful eyes—from long practice—but she saw that it would do no good. "You really do?"

"I do, indeed!" answered the miscreant. "In my present temper—and necessity—I would rob anybody, from a millionaire to a miner. Plenty of people have robbed me!"

"And my diamonds—what will become of them?" asked the victim. "You'll—will you sell them?"

"What else?" retorted the young man. "Get about one fourth their value, I expect; perhaps not that. But it'll be something. Now, we've talked enough. Unlock that chain of yours and give me the case!"

Miss Morton-Ferriby hesitated. At her side the maid

was trembling and whimpering—and the highwayman, she saw clearly, meant to have the morocco box.

"Be quiet, Felice!" she said suddenly. Then she turned to the assailant. "Look here!" she continued. "Be sensible! You know as well as I do that you're bound to be caught. We're close to Berwick. I'll set the police on you as soon as I get there. Your description will be wired all over the country at once. You can't get away, especially with those diamonds on you. You know you can't!"

"That shows how very little you know!" retorted the highwayman. "Do you think I haven't laid my plans for an affair of this sort? Of course!—and nothing can upset them. You can go into Berwick and set every policeman from there to Newcastle to work! No good!"

"You absolutely mean to have my diamonds?" said Miss Morton-Ferriby. "Fact?"

"Stern fact!" asserted the highwayman. "So——"

Miss Morton-Ferriby suddenly leaned nearer to him. A curious expression came over her face.

"Oh, very well!" she said. "Then I'm at your mercy. But not in the way you think, my good man! Look here! Are you very hard up? Come, now?"

The young man hesitated, flushed a little, and gave his questioner a queer, suspicious glance.

"Well, not hard up to the extent that I've got nothing on me," he answered. "I've a fair lot, as a matter of fact; couldn't carry this out without funds, you know. But—I want a big haul. Why?"

"I said just now, I'm at your mercy," replied Miss Morton-Ferriby. "I shall have to tell you a secret. Look here! If I give you a hundred pounds in notes, just now, will you swear to keep my secret? This—this is quite apart from the other matter. When—when you've

heard the secret you can rob me of my diamonds if you want to. But I don't think you will!"

"What do you mean?" demanded the captor. "What's all this? What secret?"

"This!" said Miss Morton-Ferriby, leaning still nearer. "Supposing—just supposing, you know—that these aren't real diamonds at all, that they're paste, eh?—that it's all a big bluff—advertising, publicity, all that sort of thing, you know! Paste, imitation, all right for the stage. Supposing that nobody knows and that I don't want anybody to know, either? As you've forced me into this predicament, take a hundred pounds and keep the secret!"

The highwayman, who, until that moment, had kept his revolver at an unpleasant attitude, dropped it, and drew back a foot or two. He gazed moodily at his victim.

"Are you suggesting a fact?" he asked.

Miss Morton-Ferriby gave him a knowing look.

"Do you think I—a business woman!—would be such a fool as to carry real diamonds about in this way?" she asked. "Of course not! I have a few good diamonds—but they're in London. Don't," she added, with a coaxing smile, "don't give me away! The public like to talk about my diamonds! Let them!"

The highwayman took off his cap and rubbed the top of his head—Miss Morton-Ferriby noticed that he had very curly hair. He suddenly lifted his face with a queer smile.

"Oh, hang the paste, and the hundred pounds too!" he exclaimed. "Look here!—a fair deal. Give me a kiss, and I'll keep the secret. There!—just one!"

"Oh!" faltered Miss Morton-Ferriby. "I—well——"

The maid looked discreetly aside. She heard . . . then her mistress's voice followed.

"Would you have really robbed me?" asked Miss Morton-Ferriby.

"I would, indeed!" declared the disappointed one. "However!—I've had that! Well . . . there's an end of it!"

Half an hour later Miss Morton-Ferriby drove into Berwick. But instead of going straight to the hotel, she made an inquiry and then went to the private residence of the principal banker. When she emerged from it shortly afterward and reëntered her car the morocco box was gone from her slender wrist.

"I've left the diamonds with that banker man, Felice," she observed quietly. "They're getting a bit too notorious."

XVIII

THE COMING OF A COMET

Once a market town, of no great size but of some importance in the old days, St. Lys-in-the-Wold has for many a long year been no more than a quiet and out-of-the-way roadside village. It lies in the midst of a lone country, far away from modernity of any complexion, its nearest railway station is five miles away, and its relations with anything outside its borders are of the slightest. Its chief concern is with agriculture, but it also makes brooms or besoms—an ancient industry which has flourished among its inhabitants for many centuries. Outside the limits of the parish its people rarely stray; consequently they are a simple and an old-fashioned race, marrying among themselves and having a profound distrust of what they consider foreign—by which they mean everything that comes from outside a radius of ten miles. To walk through the one wide street of St. Lys, no matter what day or what hour of the day it may be, is to see a township of somnolence, of closed doors and shut windows, for the folk who are not working in the fields are working indoors and the women are not given to gossipping at the thresholds.

Eighty years ago everything in St. Lys was different. The road on which it lies is one of the main arteries between north and south. Until the railways began to cut up the land it was alive all day and all night with mail coaches, baggage coaches, express coaches, post chaises,

my lord's travelling carriage, and the squire's family conveyance. The giant houses on each side of the wide street were always ringing with the whirr of wheels and the clank of horse-shoes, and the old men and the children always had something to stare at. In those days the streets had no grass growing among the cobblestones which paved it for a score yards in front of the houses; now grass grew there freely, and there need have been small wonder if it had grown in the centre of the almost deserted highway.

Nevertheless, in this lonely and quiet place there was one house wherein something of the glories of the past might be seen by merely stepping across the threshold. Halfway along the street stood the Buck Hotel—a big, rambling hostelry which in the good old times was famous as one of the best inns between London and York. It was a Sixteenth Century structure, a place of great rooms with ornamented ceilings, a wide fireplace, oak panelling, and ancient furniture; old silver, old china, old glass, and old pewter were seen in every corner of it; when you entered it you left the Nineteenth Century behind you and began to think of such things as mulled ale and spiced wine. Behind it, its huge stables still remained as in the coaching days. Looking at them from the bow window of the old house, you expected to see spanking teams brought out by thin-legged stable boys. Much of the air of the old times, indeed, still hovered about the Buck, and for that there was a good reason. It had always belonged to one family, the Maizeys, ever since it was a hostelry, and they had made a fortune out of it and never intended to leave it. Such trade as there was to be made out of St. Lys itself, or from the highway traffic, would not have kept the Buck open for a month, but St. Lys stands halfway between the kennels of two

famous packs of foxhounds, and in the hunting season the old rooms were always full of great folk, and the stables of their hunters. From October to March the Buck was as busy as a Riviera hotel is in the height of the season, and enough money was taken then to pay all expenses for the rest of the year and leave a handsome profit. But in the summer months everything went very slowly about the old house: the winter servants were gone; nobody came to stay; nobody but a few habitués, farmers and inhabitants of St. Lys, looked in, and Daniel Maizey, the then host and proprietor, had nothing to do but read the paper, potter about house and garden, and stare out of his bow windows at the quiet street and the old church immediately opposite. Nothing ever happened at St. Lys, he would have told you, from the time of the last meet in spring until cub hunting started in early autumn—nothing. And he was therefore all the more surprised when, happening to be standing at the door of his wide, oak-panelled, stone-floored entrance hall one fine June evening, he saw an open carriage turn into the street and make in his direction. He recognized the carriage as having been hired from the railway station five miles off. He saw that it contained a quantity of luggage piled up on the box and on the front seat, while on the back seat was a gentleman, who, to Daniel Maizey, was a stranger.

The carriage drew up at the door of the Buck, and Daniel went forward to meet the new arrival. He found himself confronting a gentleman who appeared to be about fifty years of age; a tall, well-built gentleman of handsome and eminently prosperous appearance, irreproachably attired in gray tweed, and bearing about him all the signs of a man of position and extravagance. He had already alighted from the carriage by the time

Daniel, who was fat and wheezy, had waddled up to it. He looked at the landlord with a slight smile and slightly knitted brows. "Good-evening," he said pleasantly, in a voice which seemed to Daniel to have some foreign accent. "I wish to stay here for a day or two—I suppose you have accommodation?"

"Certainly, sir, the very best, sir," replied Daniel. "If you will step inside, sir, we will show you rooms."

The stranger walked into the big entrance hall and, looking about him, smiled again. Daniel summoned his daughter from the bar; the three went up the wide staircase together. Within five minutes the stranger had selected a sitting room and a bedroom; they were the best in the house and were always let to Lord Farmchester during the hunting season. They went downstairs again; the stranger watched the transfer of his many portmanteaux and various impedimenta from the carriage to the house. Daniel observed that the labels of many American hotels decorated the luggage, and from other evidences concluded that the stranger had recently come from the United States by the Cunard Line. He noticed, too, that his guest paid the driver of the carriage very liberally and gave him a handsome tip, and he decided that he was some wealthy Yankee who was touring England. When the last piece of luggage had been carried away upstairs the stranger turned within the little bar parlour and, looking about him, laughed softly. He glanced at Daniel with an amused eye.

"I see, Mr. Maizey," he said, "that you do not remember me."

The landlord gazed at him wonderingly.

"No, indeed, sir," he replied. "I can't say that I do. I rather pride myself on remembering my customers'

faces, but it must be a long time since you were here, sir."

"It is a long time, Mr. Maizey. But I was never here as a customer," said the stranger. "And yet I know every inch of this house, where the secret stairs are, and which is the haunted room. Come, Mr. Maizey, where are your eyes. Have you forgotten Dick Halliday?"

Daniel's mouth and eyes opened to their widest extent. He stepped back a pace and, raising his hand to his brows, stared long and fixedly at the man before him. The man, still smiling, held out his hand. "This is Dick Halliday, sure," he said. "Shake hands, Mr. Maizey—you're the first St. Lysian I've struck against so far."

The landlord, who was startled out of his usual composure, took the hand and shook it vigorously.

"God bless my life and soul!" he said. "Deary me to-day! Upon my word, sir, I shouldn't have known you."

"I dare say not," said Dick Halliday. "So far as I remember I went out of St. Lys owning as much as I stood up in, and perhaps a half crown or so. Now . . ."

He paused, and smiled grimly; the landlord hastened to anticipate. "And now you've come back, sir, with a fortune?"

"Two fortunes, three fortunes," assented Mr. Halliday. "Ten fortunes, according to the St. Lys standard, Mr. Maizey. But never mind that . . . I'll tell you all about it later. In the meantime . . ."

"You'll be wanting dinner, sir," said Daniel. "It shall——"

"No," said Mr. Halliday. "I'll tell you what I do want, and that's something I haven't had for years . . .

Yorkshire high tea. You know what that is . . . nobody better. And while it's being made ready, I'll just step over to the churchyard and look at my mother's grave." He strode away across the wide street, and Daniel, still suffering from the shock, stared after him with wondering eyes.

"God bless my life and soul!" he exclaimed again. "Dick Halliday back again in St. Lys and a man of fortune! Such a thing was never heard of!"

"That's not the Dick Halliday I've heard you speak of, Father, is it?" asked the daughter, who had listened to all that the stranger had said. "Not the one who was so wild?"

"H—sh, my dear!" said Daniel. "Ye-es, the very same. Oh, what a wild boy he was!—only a boy, my dear, but such a Tartar. The things he did!—they're remembered in St. Lys to this day. And now he comes back quite the gentleman, and with a fortune. Bless my life! What a lot there will be to talk about!"

The returned prodigal, walking slowly across the street, looked about him with eyes which recognized everything.

"There's nothing of change in it," he mused. "The only change is in me. I wonder if there's any change in here?"

He passed through the moss-grown lich-gate and, entering the churchyard, made his way to a corner where a grave lay under the shadow of an ancient yew tree. It had no monument and no distinguishing mark, the grass was long and unkempt about it, and its immediate surroundings were desolate. Yet some hand had recently laid upon it a bunch of simple flowers.

Dick Halliday folded his arms and looked at the dreariness with threatening eyes.

"The skunks!" he said. "The low, mean, white-haired skunks! Couldn't remember, couldn't they? Never mind—I'll remind 'em."

As he turned away, swinging his cane as if he would have liked to bring it down on somebody's shoulders, he encountered the old sexton, who, not knowing him, touched his cap. Halliday stopped him.

"Whose grave is that?" he said, pointing to the grave he had just left.

The old man scratched his head.

"That, sir?" he said. "Why, now, that there's the tomb of a poor lady governess i' th' place a many years ago—Mrs. Halliday her name were. Matter o'three-and-twenty year it is since she were taken, mister."

"Why isn't the grave kept tidier?" demanded Halliday.

The old man bent down and looked at the grave as if in surprise.

"Ah, to be sure that grass does want a bit o' trimming," he said. "But ye see, sir, when folk dies and hasn't nobody to remember 'em, their places of sepulchre, as you might term it, gets neglected—so they do! Not that it makes much difference to them, being where they are, sir," he added reflectively.

"Hadn't this lady any friends, then?" asked Halliday.

"Seemingly not, poor thing," replied the sexton. "One son she had, and a nice young varmint he was! One o' that sort that's allus in trouble. And when she dies, away he went—hanged, I should think he is, by this time."

"Who put those there?" asked Halliday, pointing to the flowers.

"Them, now? Ah, them was put there only this here

blessed mornin' by two old maids as remembers the poor lady," said the sexton. "Name of Maidment—lives in the little house at Town End. Yes, they often puts a few flowers on that there tomb—don't cost 'em naught, d'ye see, master."

Halliday slipped a half crown into his hand and went away frowning. He remembered the three families which his mother had served as morning governess at one time or another . . . the doctor's, the solicitor's, the principal farmer's. She had done good service to all, for small pay, and yet none of them had apparently had a thought of her, once dead. And he scowled as he went across to the Buck, and his thoughts of St. Lys people were anything but favourable to them.

He showed nothing of this, however, once he had crossed the threshold of the hotel. Rather, he made himself remarkably agreeable to Daniel Maizey and his wife and daughters, all of whom had gathered in the bar to gaze upon this returned native. He drank their health and declared that although he had spent the last twenty years of his life in the United States he was still at heart a St. Lysian.

"I hope you've no objection, Mr. Halliday, to its being known that you've returned to us?" said Daniel Maizey. "There'll be some in here this evening, sir, some of the regular customers, who'll be proud to shake your hand."

"Certainly, certainly!" responded Halliday. "I mean to see all old friends. I'll come down when I've had my high tea. But I expect everybody has forgotten me."

He reflected somewhat grimly, as he sat alone in his sitting room, that he had not had a friend in the place when he left it. He had always been regarded as a scapegrace—why, he could not clearly understand. As a lad

he had suffered from high spirits, and having no father to check him he had indulged them to a degree which no doubt seemed scandalous to the peace-abiding folk of St. Lys. But beyond robbing a few orchards, playing innumerable practical jokes upon unsuspecting persons, and indulging in free fights with the village boys whenever opportunity arose, he was not conscious of having unduly transgressed. And certainly nobody in St. Lys had shown any sorrow at his going. After his mother's death her small effects had been sold to defray the funeral expenses and to pay some little debts—there had been nothing left for him, and nobody had offered to help him. And so one fine morning he had walked out of the place without as much as a good-bye to anybody but the two old maids, who had slipped a few shillings into his pocket and kissed him. It was good to his heart to know that they were still alive, and that they remembered his mother.

When he went down to the bar parlour that evening Halliday speedily became the centre of a company of men eager to renew his acquaintance. Naturally, they wanted to know his story and he had to tell it. He had gone straight from St. Lys to Liverpool, and had worked his way across the Atlantic. He had been all sorts of things in the United States before he finally struck into the right path. But he had struck that path at last and . . . yes, he saw no reason for being shy about it, for it was the truth . . . he was a rich man, a very rich man.

"And if one may ask without offence, in what line did you make your pile as you term it, Mr. Halliday?" inquired one of the much-interested company.

"Speculating in real estate," replied Halliday.

"In America, of course, sir?" said the inquirer.

"Sure!" said Halliday. "Yes, sir, I know where you

can pull off your twenty, and your thirty, aye, and your forty per cent. on investments in real estate in that country, without risk, where you cannot get five per cent. in this without risk. That's so!"

He saw the instinct of greed rise up in the faces round him, and when he went to bed that night he laughed softly. "They'll be coming to ask me where they can invest some of their grubbings," he mused. "I know them!"

But for the next day or two Halliday was too busy to be bothered with callers, though several people left their cards upon him, notably the vicar, the doctor, the solicitor. He had two objects immediately in view, now that he had arrived at St. Lys: the first was to see about a proper monument for his mother's grave; the second to interview the two old maids. So the morning after his arrival he drove off to the nearest town to see a monumental mason, and coming back in the afternoon walked out to the Town End and knocked at the door of the little cottage from which twenty-three years previous he had set off into the world.

Oddly enough, the two old maids recognized him; oddly enough, too, he found them little changed. Their ages had been uncertain when he went away; they now confessed to sixty-five. But they were alert and cheerful and active, and greatly interested in him and his doings, and Halliday drank a cup of tea with them and told them a good deal more than he had told the company at the Buck. And he noticed now what he had never noticed as a boy, being then careless and unobservant, namely, that the old maids were very poor and had no servant, and thereupon his active mind began scheming.

His mind, however, had more schemes in it than one. That night, having a chat with Daniel Maizey over a

night-cap and a cigar after the Buck had closed its doors, he told that worthy person that he wished to give a series of entertainments during his stay in St. Lys. He meant to give a tea party to all the children; a supper party to all the men and women; a grand dinner party to a select assemblage of what Daniel called the upper circle. There and then he and Daniel put their heads together as to the arrangements, and Daniel's respect for Mr. Halliday increased in one great leap when that gentleman wrote out a check for a very handsome amount on a London bank and told him to go ahead and never mind how much more he spent. And for the next few days things about the Buck were very busy indeed. If a man had been thirsting for popularity he could not have had more offered to him than Halliday had during his first week in St. Lys. Every child in the place knew him, every old man touched his hat, every old woman made her curtsey. He was regaled with multitudinous clouds of incense on the night of the tea party and the supper party, and to crown everything, at the close of the latter event the church choir gathered under his window and sang serenades. It was a wonder, said the eldest Miss Maizey, that they did not present him with an illuminated address and a wreath of laurel.

But the dinner party, in the great room of the Buck, was an event of which many of those who were privileged to attend it still talk with reverence. Everybody who was anybody in St. Lys was there: the vicar, the curate, the one doctor, the one solicitor, the principal tradesmen, the farmers. A special cook had been brought down from London; some of Daniel's winter waiters had been summoned to the scene; Daniel himself had selected the wines. Such a banquet, such wines, such cigars, had never been known in St. Lys. There

was, of course, some speech making; the vicar, whom Halliday particularly remembered as having always been down on him in his boyhood, was almost emotional as he proposed the health of the giver of the feast, and grew quite unusually eloquent as he expatiated on his career as being a signal example of what perseverance allied to native talent can do. There was more adulation and eulogy, and when the toast was drunk with musical honours every man who was near enough shook hands with its subject with great fervour.

Halliday was quite unmoved. He went to bed that night smiling his grim smile.

"So people still fall down and worship the golden calf!" he said. "Well—I suppose it's human nature. I wonder what they would have said to me if I had come back as poor as when I went away?" He fell asleep wondering what the next development would be. It came next day in the shape of a call from the vicar, who, after thanking him for his hospitality of the previous evening, led the way with much circumlocution to the subject of investments. Could Mr. Halliday advise him? It was not much that a country clergyman could save out of a modest stipend (the living was worth seven hundred a year), but he had some savings, now invested in English railway stock. Well invested, certainly, but only bringing in four per cent. Did Mr. Halliday think it wise to? . . .

Halliday thrust his hands deep in his trousers pockets and favoured his caller with a long stare.

"I never advise," he said bluntly. "I sometimes suggest. How much do you want to lay out?"

The vicar made shy reference to a thousand pounds.

"What you really mean is this, if you tell the truth," said Halliday, still more bluntly—"you've got a thou-

sand pounds with which you'd like to have a flutter, and if you can get thirty per cent. on it. I know enough of your income and of you to know that if you lost that thousand pounds it wouldn't break you. Very good—there's a list of things that are paying from twenty to forty per cent. I recommend none of them, advise none of them. I have money in them myself—so have friends of mine. But if you buy in them you do it at your own risk. I have nothing to do with it. You understand?"

The vicar put the list in his pocket and said he quite understood, as indeed he thought he did, for he believed that Halliday was putting him on a good thing in his own way. And, emboldened by this, he left personal matters and asked Halliday to give him a large donation to the restoration fund of the church. Halliday stared at him harder than ever.

"H'm," he said. "You parsons always were cool hands at begging. Now I'd just like to ask you a question? Aren't you responsible for the proper care of the churchyard and the church?"

"Certainly," replied the vicar.

"Then perhaps you can tell me," continued Halliday, whose tones grew chillier and chillier, "how it was that when I returned here last week I found my mother's grave in a shamefully neglected condition? Now I remember very well that my mother taught in your Sunday school, and played the organ in your church, and was generally useful in your parish, and yet I come back and find that you didn't care to see that the grass was clipped round her grave. Eh?"

The vicar, who was very much disturbed, attempted tame explanations. Halliday waved his hand.

"Say, I'm not the sort of man to listen to feeble excuses," he said. "Now, if it hadn't been for that I'd

have given you a good check for your restoration, and perhaps I wouldn't have minded paying the whole amount myself—a few thousands is neither here nor there with me. As it is, I won't give you a cent. That's final! Good-morning."

Other men came to Halliday on the first of the vicar's errands, or waylaid him in the street, or on the roadside. They all had the same tale—money out at four and five per cent. and their mouths watering after those big percentages of which they had heard him speak. To one and all he gave the answer he had given the vicar. He never advised; sometimes he suggested. There were lists of certain things, and they could do what they liked.

"Fools!" he said to himself. "Let them burn their fingers. They can afford it."

He was busy enough himself just then without bothering about business, he said somewhat gruffly to some of these people. First there was the task of superintending the erection of his mother's monument; he never left the churchyard while the masons were busied there; every detail passed under his supervision. In the intervals of this task he occupied himself with another: in the centre of the village stood a pretty old house in the middle of a walled garden; it had been to let for some months. Halliday interviewed its owner and bought it outright for a handsome sum. He had it put in repair and the garden restocked; then came an upholsterer from the nearest big town and partly furnished it. The folk of St. Lys saw all these preparations, and made up their minds that Mr. Halliday had decided to retire from business and to settle down amongst them; Halliday said nothing in contradiction.

The monument in the churchyard and the final dis-

positions of the house were completed on the same day. When everything had been finished of the former Halliday paid the workmen handsomely and sent them across to the Buck, to a dinner which he had especially ordered for them. That done, he walked down the village to the old maids' cottage, begged a cup of tea from them, and then invited them to take a stroll with him. In some wonderment they followed him to the house which he had bought, and through the garden into the little entrance hall.

"Now, then," he said, laying a hand on the thin shoulder of each. "You see this house and garden. They're yours. Here are the keys and here are the papers. Everything in it's yours. I've left you room to bring your own furniture in, because I knew you'd want it. And listen. Every Saturday morning as long as ever you live the lawyer will call and give you five pounds—that's yours too. Now, not a word, but go every day and look at my mother's grave, and once a week put fresh flowers on it. Because—I shall never come back."

Then, before they could say a word, he kissed the two wondering old ladies and was gone. And that night Daniel Maizey and the regular company of the Buck talked of him, as folks talk of a comet, which comes and tarries awhile, and is seen no more.

XIX

THE WHEATSTACK

The small farm which the two O'Driscoll brothers tenanted stood in an isolated spot. The farm buildings were sunk in a depression of the ground; a small hill rose behind them and shut out all view of the house. To the left of the house stretched a field of four acres, fringed by trees and terminating in a wood. The O'Driscolls' nearest neighbours, the Flynns, small farmers like themselves, lived two miles away.

A lonely situation for the two young men, red-haired, keen-eyed, and bright-complexioned, of sharp wit and soft speech. Nevertheless, it was a saying of the countryside that if Patrick and Con O'Driscoll saw no living soul, year out, year in, but their two selves, they would not ask for better company; for they were as like each other as two peas in looks, and their tastes were alike in farming, girls, and sport.

It was their boast that they had never quarrelled in the course of their five years' holding of the farm. You might come upon them at any hour of the day, and would never hear an ill word pass between them. The village folk, however, had observed of late that this comment on their attachment held not quite so good. No rumour of a disagreement had come to them, but it was noticed that the elder of them, Patrick, treated the younger, Con, with a hint of surliness, a suggestion of resentment. It was said that Con took this in good part:

he was the franker spirit of the two: his face expressed it. Had not the elder brother the right to bully the younger? he had said. He was glad that Patrick had begun to recognize his rights. For himself, he had no bone to pick with Patrick, and he knew his brother could have no complaint of him. Nothing had ever come between them yet, said Con O'Driscoll, and he saw no reason why it ever should.

But there were those of the neighbours who, hearing this spoken, shook their heads, and remarked to one another that it had been always smooth sailing among the O'Driscolls until a woman stepped between them. Then the hot blood, which expressed itself in the red cheeks, the red hair, the flinty eyes of the brothers, would flame into red riot and alter the position of affairs.

They who talked thus, half in earnest and more in jest, did not know that the time of which they spoke was hard at hand. For the O'Driscolls had always been "mad after women," and the madness which had burst out in one hour would quench itself in the next, and no harm done to the hearts of the O'Driscolls. So there had been girls in plenty shared between Patrick and Con, and therefore jokes in common between the two. But all the time Patrick knew that Con was only "gaming," and Con had a friendly understanding to the same effect of Patrick. Nevertheless, Patrick had once made an observation to his brother which Con remembered:

"So long as 'tis only playin' with the gerrls the two of us are, the one taste that we have in women will be drawin' us together. But if ever the two of us chance to play the same game in earnest, the taste we have in common will drive us poles apart."

One year after the O'Driscolls had first settled on the farm they began to be acquainted with the Flynns

At that time Norah Flynn, the only daughter of her parents, was a girl of fourteen, with a face that promised more than beauty—a peculiar charm. For three years the O'Driscolls treated her as a child, kissed her as a child, teased her as a child, brought her sweets, and gave her chickens which she might call her own. But when Norah was nineteen she turned up her hair one day, without telling anyone what she was going to do.

It happened that the two O'Driscolls walked over that afternoon to ask the advice of her father on an ailing cow. Together they came upon the girl—her yellow hair turned off the white nape of her neck, her skirt down to her ankles, a new consciousness in her face. They stood watching her; she, unaware that they were by, engaged in some duty of the house. Neither spoke to the other of the change in her, nor, strangely enough, to the girl herself. But Norah, noticing that they had changed to her, was half sorry and half glad. She noticed, at the same time, that they had changed a little to each other.

It was growing toward the end of harvest, and there was a wheatstack to be piled in the far end of that field of the O'Driscolls which terminated by the wood. The two men had been at it all the morning. Dinner over, Patrick insisted they should get to work upon the stack again. Con, however, avoiding his brother's eyes, said that he had a headache from working in the sun. He would walk over to the town and buy from the chemist a powder which might do him good. Patrick regarded him with a hint of sullen suspicion in his glance and remarked that, as it happened, he had a bad stitch in his side, but he was not such a fool as to think more of a bit of pain than of getting on with the stack. He should not spare himself, but would have the stack half done

before Con got back from his gallivantings with the girls.

And Con, good-humouredly disregarding the ill temper of his brother, replied he should not be over an hour and a half away, and would set to work with a will upon the wheatstack when he returned.

As Con set out from the farm Patrick watched him, fork in hand. From a position whence Con could not see him, he watched which turning he would take. Con came to the crossroads, and then looked back at the farm. Patrick ground his teeth, for the road which Con had taken was not the road to the town, but the way which led to the Flynns'. He flung down the pitchfork and ran a few steps toward the road. But he came back, muttering to himself, kicked down a portion of the wheatstack in his fury, then picked up the fork and went on stabbing great bunches into the stack.

Two hours and a half later Patrick, looking up from his work, beheld, over the hedge which fringed the bottom of the field, two heads moving slowly together, a red head and a yellow one. It was Con, returned, and Norah Flynn had come back all the way with him. Patrick waited to see if they would both turn into the farm. But they separated, and the yellow head bobbed up the road over the top of the hedge.

Five minutes later Con, having taken off his coat, came into the field where Patrick was at work, carrying his own fork with him. He was sorry he was later than he said; he hoped his brother had not done too much. He had hurried home as quickly as he was able. Con's eyes were bright, his speech tripping; there was a buoyant confusion in his manner. His brother leaned upon his pitchfork, lowered his brows, shoved out his thick under-lip, and scowled full at him.

For one moment Con, disconcerted, lost his self-possession. He could not tell why, but suddenly this flashed into his head: "*But if ever the two of us chance to play the same game in earnest, the taste we have in common will drive us poles apart.*"

He had meant to tell his brother the exact truth—that he had never intended to go to the town, that he had had a longing to see Norah Flynn and had turned his steps toward her father's farm; had met her halfway there, talked an hour with her, been so engrossed by her that he had not noticed how the time was slipping by.

But that look on Patrick's face had altered everything. He was not fit to hear the truth, and a lie escaped from Con's nervous lips:

"And the chemist——"

Patrick, leaning more heavily still upon his fork, his gaze still full upon his brother, remarked with grim sarcasm:

"*Ay! ye went to the best chemist, I'm thinking!*"

Con, seeing the sneer, thought to carry off his defection with a gay bravado.

"An' the powder he give me—'twas something exthraordinary—the good it did my head!"

"Ay, ye seem betther!" said Patrick, with the same look and the same sneer.

"The pain in the head," went on Con, setting to work upon the stack "—'tis gone from me altogether."

"Ye lie!" Patrick burst out, and with the violence of his words his lips and eyes seemed to swell. "The chemist that ye went to was a woman's lips!"

Con stopped working; the fierceness of his brother's aspect made his heart quail, but he faced him boldly.

"Ye lie yourself! I was sp'akin' to Norah, but I never

kissed her. I've kissed her as a child, the same as yourself, Pat, but I've never kissed her as a woman. Sure, Norah has no thoughts o' men——"

"Then why wouldn't she show herself over the hedge to me? If she has no thoughts o' men, why does she walk the two miles from her father's place along with you an' back?" He wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. "'Twas arranged between the two o' ye—that ye'd meet unknown to myself. But I saw ye, lookin' back at the crossroads to see was I markin' which way ye went. I see the way of it—ye thought to trick me out o' the gerrl."

"Trick *you* out of Norah?" said Con.

"Ye knew as well as myself that I was lookin' to make Norah Flynn my wife, an' ye thought to take the wind out o' my sails. Ye've been courtin' her behind my back all along——"

"By God, that's another lie agin you!" said Con, white to the lips. "I never knew ye had a fancy for her——"

"'Tis no fancy," said Patrick, trembling with passion. "What did I warn ye, man!—that so long as the two of us was only playin' with the women, the taste we had in common would be drawin' us together. But if the two of us chanced to be playin' the same game in earnest——" He raised his voice and his hands together.

"Ye have taken her from me!" he cried. "You liar!"

He stood a few yards from his brother, his fists clenched and his whole face on fire.

Con, afraid that he would kill him, stood his ground, and, as a protection to his body, held his pitchfork in front of him, the prongs pointing in Patrick's direction.

"Ye won't call me that again," said Con.

"Liar!" cried Patrick, rushing furiously at him.

There was a sharp shriek of "Ah—ah-h!"

Patrick O'Driscoll fell backward to the ground, the pitchfork upon which he had impaled himself quivering in his body.

For a second Con stood as if he were bound in chains. Then— "Pat, old man, are ye hurted?" he whispered. "Pat, spake to me—spake to me, man!" He flung himself down by the body, and moved the head and the hands up and down. "Mother o' God!—he's dead!"

The first instinct after that was to look all round him. They had been standing behind the wheatstack, so that it shut out all sight of the house. On the other side of them was the wood, at the foot of the field the high hedge. No one in sight—just then! But what if there had been? Con began to sob and speak aloud.

"They'll say that I killed ye; what's there to prove that I haven't! They'll hang me—an' I hadn't a thought o' harm in me heart! Oh, God, what will I do!" He stooped and examined the body, where one prong of the pitchfork had passed through the heart. The blood had begun to well up in little clots. On a wild impulse he seized the dead man in his arms, and, covered by the wheatstack, began to drag the body over the fence into the wood.

"I can hide it under the leaves. . . ."

Inside the wood he stopped short, facing the wheatstack.

"I must hide it. They'll say that I killed him—I must hide it." Suddenly he lifted the body over the fence again, laid it down in the ditch, and began with fierce, impatient hands to pull down a part of the stack. That was soon done. When he got down to where it stood three feet off the ground he dragged the body toward him, lifted it in his arms, and planted it in the middle

of the stack, doubled up. Then he set to work to build the stack over it. He worked like a thing not made of flesh and blood, but iron and steel and levers and cranks. He worked till he was dripping with sweat, his hands blistered, his limbs cramped; but Con had as little feeling as the iron and the steel.

When he had finished building it he thatched it securely. Although innocent of the blood of his brother Patrick, the fear that he would yet be judged as his murderer gave him the subtle calculation of a criminal. If they found out, he would be hanged. But why should they find out? The lonely road beyond the hedge led nowhere but directly to the O'Driscolls' farm. No one, therefore, would be likely to pass by, unless those who had farm business with the brothers. The work was inconsiderable, they kept no hired labourers and cooked their own simple food, so that there was nobody to have observed him from the windows of the house. Con began to argue with himself as to how he should account for the disappearance of Patrick. He made up his mind that he would give out how they had quarrelled at last; how Patrick, who was known to have the hotter temper of the two, had flung out of the place, saying he would leave the farm to Con and try his fortune in America. Yes, that was the best way.

Con O'Driscoll decided on this plan. For a day or two after the thatching of the wheatstack he was left to his own resources. The weather, changing suddenly, became peculiarly wet and windy for the time of year; and everyone preferred the comfort of his own fireside to the forlorn aspect of the sodden roads. So Con kept house by himself, drinking a good deal, and eating little, and sitting always by that window which overlooked the wheatstack by the wood. There was Norah, he kept

saying to himself. The farm was his; he could marry Norah now—if she would have him. But should he marry—with that guilt upon his soul? What guilt? He was innocent of the death of Patrick. Innocent in heart and hands. Then why shouldn't he marry? Because of That which would always be between the man and his wife—the body of Patrick O'Driscoll there in that stack. But why should he tell her? Plenty of men, said Con, kept plenty of secrets from their wives. Confession!—he should never go to church again!

So not a soul disturbed his unhappy broodings, as he kept watch from his window over the wheatstack, until the third day, which was brighter than the previous days, when, early in the afternoon, someone tapped at the door. Con was at the window when the tap sounded—what if they had come for him! He trembled violently, and could not bring himself to go to the door. At last he summoned strength, lifted the latch and looked out. And there stood Norah Flynn.

When she saw him she turned pale.

"Con!" said Norah. "What ails you? You look ill."

"Come in, Norah," said Con, "come in!" He turned despairingly from her, and, without asking her to sit down, sat down himself.

"Why—you're bad; ye look as if ye'd eaten nothing," she said uncertainly, and hovered in solicitude beside his chair. Con, taking no notice of her concern, propped his face in his hands and stared at the fire.

"We've quarrelled," he said hoarsely, "Patrick an' I."

"Quarrelled!" she repeated. "What about?"

"We had some words," went on Con, "an' Patrick—he lost his temper, an'—" his voice faltered—"he's gone."

"Gone!" she said. "Where?"

"Gone to America," he answered, "an'—he won't come back again."

Suddenly his nerves broke down, his shoulders shook, and he began to weep as only a strong man can.

"Oh!" she said, in tender reproof. "Never mind, Con, he's sure to come back."

"No," said Con, fetching his breath, "he'll not come back!"

"What makes you say that?" said Norah.

"I know—I know that I'll never see him again," said Con, and his whole body shook with his sorrow.

To see him like this touched to the soul the true woman in the girl. She knelt down, without reserve, and put her arm about him.

"Never mind, Con, never mind!" she whispered.

"Ah, God knows 'twas not my fault!" he groaned.

"No—no, 'twas not your fault!" she answered, soothing him.

Con realized suddenly what she was doing. He caught her hand.

"Norah!" he cried, "what makes ye mind so much?"

She turned her face aside, and blushed.

"Tell me!" he said. "Ye shall tell me!"

"Why, I was always fond o' ye, Con," said Norah indistinctly.

"Ye love me?" said Con. She nodded her head. He dropped her hands, and stared into the fire. There was That between them! A long silence followed. She broke it by saying, with her head archly on one side, but very much in earnest:

"But—maybe ye don't care for me?"

He caught her in his arms.

"I do—I do," he said; "but ye're such a good gerrl,

Norah, an'—ye—ye deserve the whole of a man's heart."

"An' haven't I got the whole?" she said in dismay. "What other is sharin' it with me?"

"No other, asthore," said Con, "no other woman——"

"What man, then? Oh—Patrick!" she said.

He nodded his head silently.

"You were like one man, not two," said Norah. "But sure he wouldn't stand between you and me?" He said nothing. She urged him: "Sure, he wouldn't?"

"No," said Con finally, "why should that stand between us? What's gone is gone; what's passed is over." He took her and kissed her, and both were comforted. "Marry me soon," said Con, speaking with intensity, "for since he's gone from me the place is terrible lonesome."

A few minutes later she rose.

"I must not be stayin' longer," she said; "my mother will be wonderin' where I am." She picked up her shawl, which had slipped from her shoulders to the floor, and as she wrapped it round her glanced out of the window which overlooked the field.

"Why, ye've finished making the wheatstack!" she exclaimed.

"Ay," answered Con, "I've finished it."

Two days later he walked over to the Flynns' to ask the consent of Norah's parents to his marriage with their daughter. As he crossed the threshold Mr. and Mrs. Flynn exclaimed at his appearance.

"Did Norah tell ye—my brother Patrick had left me?" he said.

"She did so," said Mrs. Flynn. "A quarrel between ye, I believe?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered Con.

"Maybe over some young woman?" roguishly suggested Mr. Flynn.

Con said nothing at all.

"He was very quick-tempered," said Mrs. Flynn; "to look at him ye'd know that. Maybe he said he'd go to America when the passion was on him—an' maybe he's not gone at all—an'll come back to ye."

Con shook his head.

"But don't be takin' on this way," said Mrs. Flynn; "ye're takin' a bit of a tiff too much to heart entirely."

"Begorrah, yes," said Norah's father. "Ye're not half the boy ye were! I didn't know ye, an' ye comin' in at the door."

Then Con broached the question about his marriage. He told her parents of his prospects and possessions, a bit of land that was coming to him—that he would take care of Norah, and would love her truly. They thought the girl too young, but Con pressed them earnestly to give their consent at once. He told them he was sure of Norah's heart already, and that she would marry him, he knew, as soon as ever he would wish.

"An' when's that?" said the girl's mother.

"A month to-day!" said Con.

"The boy's over-anxious," said the mother, laughing.

"To tell ye the truth, ma'am," said Con earnestly, "since Patrick left me I'm that lonesome I wouldn't know how to be employin' myself."

"Troth, yes," said Mrs. Flynn, "ye were that thick, Patrick an' yourself. I know that."

Con rose and said, with their permission, he would ask the girl herself. And so he came to where Norah was waiting for the decision of her parents.

"They're willin', Norah," he said. "I've told 'em I

can make ye comfortable, an'll love ye true—an' now, when is the weddin' day to be?"

"In two months' time," said Norah.

"A month," said Con doggedly.

"'Tis too soon," she demurred.

"Norah, I'm terrible lonesome," he said.

She yielded at his look.

"My poor boy!—ye're thinkin' o' Pat," she whispered.

"Ay, I am so!" said Con.

The wedding took place, therefore, in four weeks' time. It was held at the little chapel which the Flynns attended, six miles distant from that to which the O'Driscolls went. Con took no notice of Father Andrew Murphy, the officiating priest. His face was resolute, and full of a strong human sympathy. He appealed directly to the heart of the young man.

When the marriage service and the simple breakfast at the Flynns' were over Con O'Driscoll took his wife to her home. She turned up her wedding gown and made a cup of tea for him as soon as she entered the place, for he was looking white, and though he tried for her sake to be gay, Norah saw that he was worn and ill. But she said nothing, for she knew that if Con wished to speak he would, and that if he did not she had no right to press him. She drew the table to the fireside and, pouring out Con's tea, told him to drink it, for it would do him good. Con gulped down half the cupful, then pushed it aside and went to the window, which looked out on the field. His wife's eyes followed him.

"What are ye lookin' at?" she said.

"At the wheatstack," he answered.

"That puts me in mind," she said. "When we were comin' in at the gate I noticed two rats beside it——"

Con shuddered violently and turned from the window.

"An' I thought to tell you to see to that," said Norah, "for they'll be gettin' to the wheat."

"Don't!" said Con.

"Why, Con?" she said.

"They're horrible things—rats," said Con O'Driscoll.

He came to the hearthside, leaned his arm on the chimney piece, and looked into the fire.

"Norah, my gerrl," he said suddenly, "I've been wonderin'—had I any right to make ye my wife?"

"What are ye sayin' to me?" she said, with frightened eyes. "An' for why should I not be your wife? Con, I *am* that."

"Ay, ye are that," he answered. "Come here to me, Norah O'Driscoll." She stood beside him, with her eyes on his. "Has a man any right to be marryin' an innocent gerrl," he said, "when there's somethin'—on his soul?"

She paused.

"If he was to be guilty o' somethin', do ye mean?" she faltered.

"No, no—not guilty, not guilty, Norah," said Con, "but knowin' somethin'—somethin' he wouldn't tell to any craythur on God's earth——"

"Not to the *priest?*" said Norah.

Con was silent. She went down on her knees beside him. "Con, is it yourself that ye're sp'akin' of?" He nodded his head. "An' ye won't tell me?" He shook it. "Wouldn't ye tell the priest?" He said nothing. "Haven't ye been to confession?"

"No!" he said hoarsely. "Not since—then!"

"Con," she cried, "go to Father Murphy. He's good

an' kind; there's many a one blesses him for the comfort and strength that he's given 'em." Con was silent. "Go to him, Con, asthore!" she cried. "Promise me, Con, you will."

Con rose up, and a new light of hope shone from his eyes.

"Ay," he said slowly, "maybe I'll go to him."

On the morrow she laid out Con's best suit for him, as if they had been married several years, and without pressing him again acted as though it were a settled thing that her husband should go to the priest. From his face she noticed with delight that his mind was quite made up to it, but an expression of decision was there too. As soon as breakfast was over, Con O'Driscoll called his wife to him and kissed her.

"Ye're a good gerrl, Norah," he said.

"I try to be, Con," she said quietly.

He took his hat and stick, and Norah watched him from the door until he came to the four crossroads. Then she drew a great sigh of relief, for Con had taken the road that led to Father Murphy's. She settled down then to tidying up the house and arranging the wedding gifts in it. It would take Con an hour to walk there, an hour to walk back, and if Father Andrew Murphy was at home, another hour, perhaps, for Con to be confessed.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when she heard the click of the gate. Con had come back. From the bedroom window she watched him walk up to the house. His step rang firm, he held himself straight, his eyes shone, there was colour in his face. Norah ran to meet him.

"I'm glad ye're back," she cried.

"I'm glad I went," said Con.

"Ye did go?" she whispered.

"Ay, an' I've told Father Murphy," said Con.

"Thank God!" she said.

"He's a good priest," said Con O'Driscoll, "an' a wise man!" But he said no more. She laid his dinner before him, and he sat down to it with a zest. Now and then he looked out of the window at the wheatstack, but his gaze was calm. . . .

At nine o'clock that night, in a storm of wind and rain, Father Andrew Murphy left the presbytery and set out across the fields; he was carrying a tin of paraffin wrapped in paper in one hand, and a box of matches was in his pocket. It was dark when he got to the farm of the O'Driscolls'. It was ten o'clock, too, and no one was about.

Father Murphy climbed over the hedge into the wood that led into the field in which the wheatstack stood. When he got to the gap over which Con had lifted the body of his brother, he let himself down into the field on to the very spot where Patrick O'Driscoll had drawn his last violent breath. As his foot snapped the dry twigs under it a rat squeaked and hurried out of sight. Father Murphy lifted the paper off the tin and sprinkled the paraffin over the stack. Then he struck a match, another, and another, and applied them where the oil was spilt. The wheat began to smoke. Father Murphy drew out his office book, and opened it at the office for the burial of the dead. The smoke grew thicker, blew out in clouds; small tongues of flame began to show.

"*Si iniquitates observaveris, Domine: Domine quis sustinebit?*"

The flames burst out of the wheat.

"*Quia apud Dominum misericordia et copiosa apud eum redemptio.*"

Two or three rats rushed out shrieking with terror.

Father Murphy's voice rose above the wind and the rain.

"*. . . et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.*"

Father Andrew Murphy closed his book. He said "Amen" three times as he watched the flames creep round and lick the slowly yielding stack. And at last he spoke, looking from the stack to the little house across the misty field.

"There, Patrick," he said. "There, Con! And God forgive me if I have not done what is right."

Then he climbed through the gap in the hedge, and disappeared into the silent wood.

Ten minutes later Norah O'Driscoll shook her husband wide awake.

"Con—Con—wake up!" she cried. "The wheatstack's on fire!"

XX

THE PRIEST AND THE MAN

When Father Terence Carroll came to Milltown as a curate on the mission, he was full of fire and zeal. There was a fervent gleam in his blue-gray Irish eyes; his peasant's mouth shut tight. He looked ahead as he walked, as if the goal he set before him beckoned him ahead—his hands were always clenched. There were souls to save in Milltown! Father Carroll meant to save them.

But he was fresh from the green fields of Ireland—the scent of them was still in his nostrils when he set foot on English ground for the first time in his young life. And the contrast chilled his soul. Behind him across the water stretched the land that he loved; the land of warm pulses which throbbed in answer to his own; the land of soft wet winds and changeful skies, where the religion of the country was the very soul of it, and a man would leave his business to attend to his Church, but not his Church to attend to his business. Here, in Milltown, it seemed to Father Carroll, the religion of the people was in the bartering and selling. The hearts were harder to touch, the pulses beat more evenly; the alms were given with more deliberation and less love. It was gray, it was smoky, it was gloomily industrious. Continually, as Father Carroll strode about the parish where he worked, he set a picture of the land which he had left behind him

beside the land in which he moved. Green for gray, dreams for realization, impulse for calculation, religion for habit.

But he had work to do, and souls to save, and he wanted to rise in the Church, that the power which he felt in him might become a living thing. He had no personal ambition, but he had big schemes for the furtherance of the Holy Church, and a great longing for all humanity, which appeared to him in the light of an ailing child entrusted to his care.

Father Carroll had not been in Milltown longer than three months when an epidemic of typhoid fever broke out in the town, and raged so furiously that the hospitals were unable to accommodate all those who sought admission. Wooden buildings were hastily erected to take in the overflow of victims. In the first week of the outbreak it was announced to Father Carroll that on him had fallen the duty of visiting those stricken down with typhoid in the two great fever hospitals. Father Carroll was glad. Here was great work to do—the administration of comfort to men and women who might soon be called to judgment by the Maker of them all. He had no fear for his own safety—he flung himself into the cause. Day and night he laboured, sleeping little and taking no rest for himself. As he strode through the long corridors of the hospitals the nurses whom he passed stood aside and looked at his face: at the strong human lines in it, at the kindly, zealous eyes and the firm mouth.

Father Carroll took no heed of them; women, so far, had not entered into his scheme of life. But once, as he was coming down a passage which was dimly lit, his office book in his hand, he became aware, without looking at them, that a few yards in front of him two young

nurses stood and watched him. A whisper reached his ears:

"Let's see if we can make him look at us. They say priests won't look at women. I'll try."

Father Carroll glanced up. He saw a pair of mischievous brown eyes, a mouth that lifted at the corners. He looked away and marched down the long passage with his swinging tread. In two minutes he had forgotten about the woman who had tried to make him look at her.

At last he himself fell sick of the fever and was taken to the hospital. Before he lost consciousness he said that he was not afraid; there was work for him to do, and he would live to do it. They assigned a private ward to Father Carroll, and a nurse to tend him. There were long periods when he knew nothing; when his mind, loosed from restriction, turned to his old home, and he cried aloud for his mother—the peasant woman who had borne him—and asked her to lay her hand on his head. Then would come lucid minutes when his eyes opened and he looked about him quietly; he found a fresh little hand on his forehead, and the sensation of a presence which was in touch with him.

"Mother!" said Father Carroll.

"Ah," he heard a voice say softly, "I wish, for your sake, that I were your mother!"

He was aware for a moment of kind young eyes, and a figure that bent in gentleness above him. Then it would seem to him that he was floating out upon a rocking sea that surged into his ears and bore him down into its trough—and he was back in Ireland, striding through its green lanes as he strode through the long passages of the hospitals, his office book in his hand, returning the salutation of the country folk he met, with questions on

their health and families: the simple questions of a good priest to a simple people.

There came a day when Death and Father Carroll struggled hard with one another, when the young priest realized that he was fighting to wrest his life from something which was fighting to snatch it from him. Many white faces were about his bed. They seemed to bob up and down and eddy round and round, like scraps of paper in a whirlpool. At last he fell into a great, sweet sleep, and awoke to a woman's face.

Nurse Margaret was sitting by his bedside, when Father Carroll opened clear, sane eyes on her.

"What are you sewing, Nurse?" he said.

"I am making a pair of baby shoes for my brother's little girl," she answered.

Father Carroll's eyes softened, for he loved children.

"That is right," he said gently, "to be giving your spare time to other people."

His eyes rested peacefully on her. What a gentle thing a refined woman was! How neatly she had arranged her red-brown hair beneath her stiff white cap; how tender her soft hands looked, as if they had always been used to smoothing fevered pillows.

Nurse Margaret looked up. Her eyes and mouth were not so restful as her hair and hands; her eyes flashed perpetually, and her mouth twitched a little. She nodded brightly at him.

"You feel ever so much better, don't you, Father?" she asked.

"I feel at peace, Nurse Margaret," he answered. "Have I been very ill?"

She shook her head; he heard her sigh.

"Oh, very, very ill," she answered; "the worst case

we have had. At one time—" she hesitated—"we gave you up altogether."

"So bad?" said Father Carroll wonderingly. He was silent a moment. Then his hand moved on the quilt.

"I owe you my life," said Father Carroll. "Nurse Margaret, I owe you my life."

She looked down at him with her clear eyes—eyes that held no depths that could not be sounded.

"I wanted to save your life," she said, under her breath.

The young priest said nothing for a time. Then he stirred restlessly.

"I have work to do, Nurse," he said, "and I mustn't be losing time."

She smiled at him delicately.

"You are gaining time by lying quiet," said Nurse Margaret; "you will only lose it by trying to get up."

"I will do what you tell me," said the young priest meekly. Then he looked at her with inquiry in his eyes.

"You're not an Englishwoman?" he said.

"What makes you think I'm not?" she answered.

"You come from Ireland," said Father Carroll; "'tis in your voice."

Nurse Margaret smiled, lifted her eyes to his, and dropped them again.

"Yes, I am Irish," she said.

"When did ye leave the old country?" said Father Carroll, trying to lift himself up in bed. She rose, stooped over him, and laid him gently down.

"How you do long to be back!" said Nurse Margaret.

"I do so," said Father Carroll, with a deep sigh.

"When you were delirious," the nurse went on, "you spoke of the County Cork, where I come from, and the

places that I know, and some of the people that I know. The church I used to go to——"

"And do ye come from the County Cork, and are ye a Catholic?" exclaimed Father Carroll. His eyes dwelt on her face. "D'ye wish that ye were back in it?" he added. "Sometimes, when ye get your Christmas vacation, ye'll be going home to Cork?"

She nodded her head.

"Yes, I always go home for Christmas," she said.

"That I might be goin' meself!" said Father Carroll.

So the days of his long convalescence passed, and yet they did not seem long to the young priest. His strength seemed to come back to him in great draughts, and with it his desire of life, his longing to do great things for the men and women in his charge. With the vitality of his splendid constitution pulsing back to him every day, it was hard for Father Carroll to be forced to lie so still. His brain worked eagerly, and the keen life looked out of his straight blue eyes. He began to tell Nurse Margaret of the longing that he had to rise in the Church—not for his own sake, but for the sake of those whom he could help; of his desire to educate and refine himself, and to acquire knowledge.

"For, ye know, I am only a common man," said Father Carroll, "of humble parents, and born in a humble home." He stopped, then went on quietly, "Ye make me think—how learning refines the mind."

"But I'm not learned, Father Carroll," said Nurse Margaret.

"Ye'll have read more books than I have," he answered. "I have read theology, but I know nothing of the great world of philosophy and poetry. But if I rise in the Church and have more time to myself I will get a little library together and teach myself more about the

minds of men and women than up to now I've had the chance of learning."

"There are things that poetry deals with," said Nurse Margaret, shaking her head, "which theology overlooks. A man may be letter-perfect in the Catechism and Commandments, and yet remain ignorant of the nature of temptation."

"That is true," said Father Carroll. "My way, so far, thank God, has not been the way of temptation, and maybe I have been too hard on them that were beset by it."

He was silent, pondering over her glib speech, which seemed deep to his simplicity—over her easy adaptability, which seemed understanding to him. He suddenly started, for, following inconsequently on this serious talk, came a girlish titter from Nurse Margaret.

"Do you know what I was laughing at?" she said. "I was remembering the first time I saw you swinging along the passage, looking neither to right nor left, and my making a bet with Nurse Violet that I could force you to look at me."

"Was that you, Nurse Margaret?" he said.

She laughed again. . . .

"'Priests are afraid to look at women,'" I said, "'but I'll make this one look at me.'" She glanced at him between her fingers, and shook her head with mischief. "And . . . I did."

Father Carroll was silent.

"You looked at me one moment, Father, as if I'd been a brick wall or a milestone, and then you brushed past, and almost trampled on us, as if we were so much dust and ashes."

"No, not like that," said Father Carroll.

"Did you ever think of us again?" she asked archly, her head on one side.

It was on the tip of his tongue to answer: "No, a priest does not think of women," but he altered it, somehow, to: "No, I was too much occupied with other things."

Nevertheless, it troubled him, the conjunction of the trivial incident with her.

Two months after the fever first attacked him he had recovered all his former health. Father Carroll stood on the hospital steps one morning and wished Nurse Margaret "Godspeed."

"I will come and see you sometimes," he said. "I won't be forgetting you. You have saved my life, Nurse Margaret."

"And would do it again!" she called after him lightly as he stepped into the sunshine of the outside world.

Father Carroll did not go home at once to the presbytery, but walked about the streets of Milltown—up and down. He had a curious suspicion that his illness had effected a change in him. It often happened, he said to himself; men went into a hospital one kind of being, and came out another. The sensation was unpleasant. Unused to analysis as his rough mind was, Father Carroll was conscious that a feeble effort toward subtle argument was going on inside his head. He was asking himself repeatedly: What did he feel like? At last the answer came: As if he had left off some part of himself. Again, he pressed himself for further explanation. What else?—he did not feel so infallible. Once more—he had more pity. Again—he had less certainty of himself.

There was something in his mind which was striving to meet him face to face. Father Carroll avoided it—he admitted this.

He passed a florist's window and looked in—this he had never done before. Flowers were women's luxuries. He had nothing to do with them. There were masses of chrysanthemums there—red, yellow, white, and pink. "She saved my life," he said aloud. Father Carroll went into the shop, bought five shillings' worth of flowers, and ordered that they should be sent to Nurse Margaret at the hospital.

"'And would do it again.'" He repeated her last words to himself over and over.

Father Carroll found himself looking at the women in the street: they were none of them like her. "God help us all!" he said aloud; "and deliver us from temptation." And he went back to the presbytery.

But he was not the same man. He knew it, but he did not know why for some time. Father Carroll found himself thinking every day of the woman who had listened to his dreams, and wished that, for his sake, she had been his mother. Out of his meagre stipend he bought Nurse Margaret flowers and fruit and chocolate. She used to thank him for them in little scented notes. Sometimes he would go and sit with her, and she was gay and easy, and always she seemed to him to understand.

It came to Father Carroll suddenly: he was in love with this woman.

It came to him as he was walking in the town at night. He clenched his fists: yes, he loved her with all his heart. It was a good love. But he was a priest.

No, he must fight it down, live it down, pray it down, crush it out of him. Was he to give up his great schemes for the furtherance of the Church, for the alleviation of humanity, that he might become the husband of a woman—he—a priest?

For several weeks Father Carroll suffered terribly under the strain. He fought with the knowledge that had come to him, as he had struggled with Death for his life. But the thing which he was fighting was not evil: it had become the strongest, purest part of him.

He loved her honourably—so he must marry her. Father Carroll wrote to his vicar, wrote to his bishop. In his own simple, manly words he told them what had happened to him: the slow, sure growth of his love; his refusal to be confronted by the discovery of it; his struggles to live it down; that the fighting was all in vain. Deeply as he regretted it, he must resign his curacy.

He took up his hat and went out to post the letter; he was plain Terence Carroll now. It occurred to him that he should put off the garb of the Church. But he had no clothes beyond those which he was wearing. In the garb of the priesthood he must tell Margaret that he was an apostate priest—for a woman's sake. Margaret would understand.

Father Carroll went straight to the hospital, and asked for Nurse Margaret. He was shown into the little sitting room where the nurses received their friends. A few minutes passed, and he waited, with a sense of peace, and no sense of fear. Then the door opened, and Nurse Margaret came in, laughing over her shoulder to someone she had left in the corridor.

"The last box of chocolates, Father Carroll, was the nicest you ever sent!" she said.

He rose to his feet.

"I am Father Carroll no more," he said.

"What do you mean?" she said, laughing at him.

"I have resigned my curacy," said Father Carroll.

"Resigned it! For what?" said Nurse Margaret.

Father Carroll held out his two rough hands.

"For you!" he said. "For you—Margaret!"

Nurse Margaret stepped backwards.

"For me?" she whispered. "For—me?"

"I love you truly," said Father Carroll.

She looked him all over from head to foot.

"What?" she said. "*You*—a *priest!*"

He remained standing just where he had risen. Her manner bewildered him utterly: did she not seem repelled by him? her voice hard and cold?—and was this possible? He took a few steps toward Nurse Margaret—she shrank from him and shuddered.

"I could never, never think of you like that," she said; "it's dreadful to me! Why, I was only—I never thought of *you* as—a *man*."

Father Carroll took his hat in his hand.

"And yet, God help me, I *am* a man!" he said, and he walked out of the door.

As he went down the passage he heard a high, hysterical note, between a burst of laughter and a cry of disgust. He knew that the voice was the voice of Nurse Margaret.

Once more the man went down the steps of the hospital, and heard the great doors close upon him. And the sun shone as it did when he had told Nurse Margaret that he could not forget her, for she had saved his life.

"And would do it again." The voice in his memory rang out so clearly that Father Carroll turned, with a sharp movement, and looked behind him, to see if she were standing on the steps. But nobody was there. He looked up for a moment at the gray, blank face of the building. She was entombed there to him: it walled her in, stony, implacable; it had closed over her head, like a sepulchre of rock.

Father Carroll struck out with a few bold steps into

the streets; but they died off into the totter of a feeble old man. Again he had that feeling that he had left some part of him behind. Once it had been nothing but his peasant's heart; this time it was the life of the man.

The light of the lamps sprang up in the city and blinked out from private houses—the houses where men had their wives and mothers, and the children who were their own. What should he do there—a man who had given up his priesthood for a woman, and, having lost that woman, had lost all?

He passed a little church, its windows full of light. To his tortured imagination the windows were great eyes, blazing scorn on him. Father Carroll bent his head before them.

"Ay, I am an outcast!" he said, beneath his breath. "Outcast of a woman—outcast of the Church!"

There was nothing left to him. He dared not return to his vicar; he had not one friend in the town who could afford to give him shelter for the night.

And he had believed that she loved him! Else, what was the meaning of her sympathy when he was ill—her gentle hands, her soft eyes and speech? It had never occurred to Father Carroll that she might not love him. It dazed him—the knowledge that Nurse Margaret had meant nothing all the time. Then her laugh rang in his ears! . . .

Eight struck from all the clocks in the town. Father Carroll came to himself as he heard them strike, and found that he had been wandering to and fro since half-past four that afternoon. At least, he said to himself, he must have been walking all that time, for he had nowhere to go, and he could give no other account of what he had been doing.

Suddenly it seemed as if the whole town began to run,

and, running, to shout as it went. Figures flew past him, calling; two or three people caught at his arm and tried to move him with them, but Father Carroll was too much stunned to stir. Then a boy dashed by, his hand hollowed round his mouth, shouting hoarsely all the way. Father Carroll tried to make out what he was shouting: it sounded like "Great choir." He stopped the boy and asked him what he said.

"Fire at the old fever hospital," the boy called, and he passed Father Carroll and disappeared out of sight.

Then Father Carroll felt as a drunken man feels when he is sobered suddenly. He took to his heels and ran, ran down the long streets the nearest way to the hospital. As he ran, with the wind hissing in his ears, he became aware that a great corner of the sky seemed to be kindled, and all the rest was black. It looked as if heaven had veiled its dark face, but one eye was looking out. Women were shrieking, men shouting, and the fire brigades were dashing down the street, when Father Carroll came to the gray walls which had closed over the woman for whom he had given up the world.

Excited voices sounded about him.

"It blazed up all of a sudden——"

"Nobody knows how it happened——"

"They've got out some of the patients——"

"If it goes on at this rate, in another hour it will be a ruin."

Father Carroll dashed up the hospital steps and in at the door. The wailing of sick women, the sobbing of sick children beat on his ears through the hiss and crackle and roar of the flames. Half-dressed creatures rushed past him—the patients who were strong enough to fight for their own lives. One woman of them stretched out her hands to him, and fell against him, crying:

"Father—Father!—save me!"

He caught her in his powerful arms and ran back with her the way that he had come. Then he dashed up the stairs again. This time he got to the children's ward. Most of the little ones were safe already, but the crying of the few that were left tore at his heart. . . . He did not know how he had done it, or who had told him the fire escape was at the window of the children's ward—but he found himself there, with the last two babies in his arms, and the firemen taking them from him. As he showed himself at the blazing window frame a great shout broke from the crowd below:

"The priest! God bless him! God save the priest!"

He turned back into the children's ward. As he ran out at the door a figure appeared on the next landing—Nurse Margaret carrying a little boy.

"Margaret!" he cried.

"The child!" she shouted back to him.

"No—you!" said Father Carroll.

"Take him—I must go back; there's a woman. . . ."

"Wait—wait for me!" he cried.

When the child was safe he struggled back to where Nurse Margaret had been standing, crying her name aloud. Her voice came to him indistinctly through the smoke:

"Here! I can't find her—she's gone!"

"Come—come!" said Father Carroll.

The staircase was red-hot beneath his feet, the banisters crackled and curled; spars were falling round him, and he could not see for the smoke. He had reached the second landing when something gripped him about the neck. Father Carroll held on to the figure. It was a woman—Margaret.

"Oh, I'm afraid!" she said.

He lifted her off her feet—some part of her clothing had caught fire; his hands felt as if they were charred to the bone, but—he felt her lips meet his, and for one lightning flash of time they stayed there.

Father Carroll reached a window. Faces met him there—outstretched hands snatched Nurse Margaret from his arms. Another moment . . . she was gone. The fireman's voice came to him, insistent, full of great fear:

"Yourself, sir—quick—the roof!"

But the warning came too late. Beneath Father Carroll's feet the floor gave way with a sudden crash; above his head the roof dropped heavily, with a roar of rushing flame.

They talk of Father Carroll in Milltown to this day as folk talk of heroes. But there are only three people living who know that he gave up his all—ambitions, vows, life, for a woman who did not think what she was doing.

XXI

A LITTLE TYRANT OF THE FIELDS

I

For five-and-twenty years—a long time in the slow-moving life of a lonely village—Gabriel Vandzavarte had exercised over St. Lys-in-the-Wold and its people an autocracy as strict and as thorough as any despotic monarch ever imposed upon his subjects. His empire over habit and custom was an undisputed thing; whatever he ordered to be done was done without demur; to have questioned his lightest command would have seemed akin to an act of high treason against the ruling sovereign, nay, rather, much more serious, for the sovereign was in far-off London, but Gabriel was there in St. Lys. And, being there, his shadow lay on every roof, every doorstep, every hearthstone—he was lawgiver and judge, and no man or woman of that generation could remember that his will had ever been crossed.

The circumstances were peculiar. St. Lys-in-the-Wold lies in the midst of that southeast corner of Yorkshire which, under the names of Thorne Waste and Hatfield Chase, has a cousinship with the Fens of Lincoln and Cambridge, and, like them, was once the haunt of heron and mallard, of pike and eel, and remained so until Cornelius Vermmyden came overseas in Charles the First's time to drain and reclaim it, bringing with him

many another Dutchman like himself, of whom an ancestor of Gabriel Vandzavarte's was one. Once drained, that aforetime desolate marsh, wherefrom kings and princes had drawn fish innumerable, became corn land of the richest and most prolific nature, with broad patches of meadow land lying brilliantly green between the stretches of red wheat and yellow barley. St. Lys was one of the principal, and at the same time most isolated, of the parishes in the twenty-four thousand acres given back to husbandry—its boundaries ran to the extent of about a mile in all directions from its centre point, the quaint old church, whose stump-like spire, low as it was, could be seen for miles across the level land. Every acre within these boundaries belonged to an old lady whom no one in St. Lys had ever seen—no one, at any rate, but Gabriel Vandzavarte. The old lady's name was Miss Canning, and it was known that she lived in London. It was also known that she had never visited St. Lys in her life. She was sovereign, true—but Gabriel Vandzavarte was her all-powerful vice regent.

Gabriel Vandzavarte held the largest farm in the village—one of five hundred acres. He was also steward, and collected all the rents. He was also general arbiter, and settled all disputes. He was the sole guardian of the poor for the parish, and zealous in discharging his duties in that office according to his conception of them. Besides him there was nobody. The vicar was an amiable old gentleman who had spent all his life in writing a monumental work on the Greek verbs, which he would never finish, and his notions of his ecclesiastical duties were faint and nebulous. There were two small farmers in St. Lys—their exact status may be gathered from the fact that they always touched their hats to Gabriel

Vandzavarte whenever they met him. Then followed the usual village tradesmen—the butcher, the wheelwright, the blacksmith, the man who kept the general shop. They were all little people, mouse-like people when compared with the well-to-do farmer who was also steward.

No one could say that Gabriel Vandzavarte was unjust in his stewardship, but everybody knew him to be hard. The small farmers trembled if they went to the half-yearly rent audit somewhat short of the exact amount due; not even the prospect of a good, solid dinner at the Roan Cow could make them oblivious of Gabriel's frown and his stern admonition. If a cottager went short of his or her rent it was a much more serious thing; a farmer might have some excuse in the fact of bad weather or an epidemic among cattle or sheep, but working folk, in receipt of regular weekly wages, could have none, because they knew exactly what they had to receive and what to pay week by week. For farmers, tradesfolk, and cottagers alike there was never any reduction—Gabriel expected none himself, and saw no reason why anyone else should have any. And if anyone fell into arrears twice running he or she had to go. Gabriel's idea of stewardship was to render an exact account of the amounts passing through his hands in pounds, shillings, and pence even to the uttermost. This drastic system had its good uses—the first thing the people thought about on receiving their weekly pittance was to put the necessary shilling or eighteenpence aside for rent—a proceeding which led to other habits of forethought and frugality.

Two other features of Gabriel Vandzavarte's autocracy may be noted as serving to show more of his character. He would have no Dissenters of any description

in the place; neither would he tolerate drunkenness, nor even over-indulgence in liquor. There was not, and never had been, any other place of worship in St. Lys-in-the-Wold than the ancient parish church; the Roan Cow was the only licensed house within the village. Gabriel took care that the people attended the church services with reasonable regularity; over the frequenters of the inn he exercised a fatherly supervision by means of a system of espionage—there was not a man who went there who did not know that if he exceeded the regulation pint of ale the news of his transgression would be made known to Gabriel ere next noontide. And the mere thought of what the steward would say in such a case, or what he might do, even to the ignominious casting out into the world of the culprit, his family, and his chattels, was sufficient to quench a thirst which otherwise could not have been slaked by anything less than two quarts.

All these things being considered, St. Lys-in-the-Wold may be regarded as somewhat of a survival of the village of feudal days. To most of the people who formed its community Gabriel was what the typical baron of the Middle Ages was to his villagers. Clad in armour, he would have played that part well—a big, burlyish man, stout of thigh and arm, reddish of cheek, and more than reddish of beard; a man with fierce, watchful blue eyes, set rather too close together on either side of a long nose. He had a habit when he rode abroad of drawing his horse's rein when he met anybody to whom he wished to speak, and he would then sit absolutely motionless in his saddle, staring through the horse's ears at the oncomer until the latter felt those blue eyes to be as large as carriage lamps. As for his voice, it was, oddly enough, harsh and domineering in conversation,

but in church, where he made all the responses and sang all the psalms and hymns, it was a very sweet and tender bass.

2

Apart from the vicarage, there was only one house in St. Lys-in-the-Wold which could be called a private residence. This was the square-built, red-brick Georgian edifice which faced the village green, and save on that side was buried among elms, beeches, and chestnuts, in whose branches innumerable birds, from rooks to the commonest of sparrows, made their abode. Under these trees, behind the house, lay an old-fashioned garden, one of those gardens which are chiefly all verdant lawn with box-hedge borderings, a wealth of holly and laurel, a fountain, and a sundial. How this house ever came to be, nobody ever knew; Gabriel Vandzavarte had a notion that some previous lord of the manor had caused it to be built as a sort of lodgment for himself, if he ever came that way, but there was no record of such a fact in any of his books. It had only been tenanted from time to time during Gabriel's recollection: once by a gentleman who wanted to hunt in that district; once for a few years by the previous vicar, who retired under the impression that he was worn out and lived quite a while longer; and once by two maiden ladies whose hobby was high-class kitchen gardening and who kept half the village in rare vegetables which the women did not know how to cook or the men to care for. This house, in the twenty-fifth year of Gabriel's stewardship (he being then forty-six years old), had been empty for more than a twelve-month, and he had often wondered who would be its next tenant. Sometimes he advertised it, but never with any great hope of its being let, for there was nothing to

do in St. Lys itself, and the nearest railway station was miles away.

One spring day, as Gabriel sat smoking his after-dinner pipe in his dining room at the Grange Farm, he was aware of the sound of wheels outside his trimly kept garden, and looking out of the window he saw a fly, which he recognized as belonging to a posting stable in the adjacent market town, pulling up at his gate. From this old-fashioned vehicle there presently descended a lady, who, after a word to the driver, turned, glanced at the ivy and jasmine-covered walls before her, and came quickly up the gravelled path to the door. A minute later and Gabriel's housekeeper admitted the visitor to his presence. Gabriel, his back to the window, had this stranger in full view as they bowed to each other. He saw a handsome, well-set up woman, presumably thirty-five years of age, fashionably dressed, and with a certain bearing which showed that she was used to having her own way. She had dark hair and dark eyes, and the latter, fixed full on Gabriel, were singularly bright and vivacious. For a second or two they stared at each other in silence: Gabriel was wondering what his visitor wanted; his visitor was wondering at his red-bearded burliness and his height. She spoke first.

"Mr. Vandzavarte?"

"At your service, ma'am," replied Gabriel. "Pray be seated."

She thanked him, and sat down in the chair he had just left.

"Please go on smoking, Mr. Vandzavarte," she said. "I should be sorry to interrupt you. I am Mrs. Esdaile." She laid a card on the table at her side. "My husband was a well-known solicitor in Grandminster."

Gabriel inclined his head. He was still in the dark.

"I have just been looking at the house near the green," continued Mrs. Esdaile. "I heard of it from a friend who saw it when cycling past here the other day, and who thought it would suit me. I think it is just the house I want, and I came to you to know if it is to let and what the rent is."

"Yes, ma'am," said Gabriel slowly, "it is to let. As for the rent, the last tenant paid fifty pounds a year for it."

He saw from her suddenly uplifted eyebrows that this news surprised her.

"There is a lot of room in it, ma'am," he hastened to add. "It is really a very low rent."

"Oh, I think it's ridiculously low!" she said, smiling. "I expected to hear of its being at least a hundred. Now, do you think you could drive back there with me, Mr. Vandzavarte, and let us go over it together? Then I can decide about taking it."

Gabriel rose with alacrity—he felt that it would be a good thing to let that house to a tenant who evidently considered fifty pounds a year a mere bagatelle. So they drove up to the house by the green and went over it together, and round the gardens and the stablings, and Gabriel soon discovered that Mrs. Esdaile was not only likely to be a desirable tenant, but that she was a woman of considerable means. The house, she said, was just what she wanted; she would like to take it on a lease for twenty-one years, and she would redecorate it at her own expense to her own liking. Then Gabriel took her back to the Grange Farm, which was only just across the green, for a cup of tea, and she gave him the address of her solicitors and bankers, and he promised to have the lease drawn up at once so that she could instruct the decorators to begin work immediately.

"It is only fair to warn you, Mrs. Esdaile," he said, as he walked down his garden with her to the fly, "that there is no society in this place. There's nobody but the vicar, and he's a very old man and quite deaf. If you find it dull——"

"I shan't be dull," she answered. "I have plenty of occupation, and I have a companion of whom I am very fond. And I suppose you'll drop in and see us sometimes, Mr. Vandzavarte?"

Then she flashed one of her vivacious smiles upon him and was driven away, and Gabriel went back to his lonely hearth, vaguely feeling that something new had come into his life. He stood before the fire for some minutes staring at the leaping flames; then he shook his head with a movement peculiar to himself and turned, after his nightly custom, to his desk, there to enter up his transactions and memoranda of the day.

3

In the history of a village so quiet, so remote as St. Lys-in-the-Wold the coming of a woman like Mrs. Esdaile makes an event of no small moment. It was quickly known that there was to be a new tenant of the house by the green because of the advent of a company of workmen who came, not from any neighbouring town, but from London, and for whom lodgings had to be found in the village. Gabriel Vandzavarte frowned when he heard of this incursion—he cherished a strong dislike to Londoners, and was afraid that they would corrupt his people and cause them to break some of his rules. Before the week was out one of the Londoners got drunk at the Roan Cow. Then Gabriel sought out Mrs. Esdaile, who visited her new house almost every day to watch

its progress in beautification, and made a formal complaint, characteristic of himself.

"That's the first time such a thing has happened in St. Lys for fifteen years," he said. "As the man is a stranger I'll overlook it this time, but it must be clearly understood that if it happens again, in his case or in the case of any of these other workmen, the offender must leave at once. I allow no drinking here."

Mrs. Esdaile looked at him as if he puzzled her.

"I hate drunkenness," she said. "But, Mr. Vandzavarte, you speak as if you were an autocrat. What do you lay down for your own people?"

"The rule is they may have one pint of ale an evening," he added. "And it's a liberal allowance. They can't afford more."

"And suppose they do have more?" she asked, watching him with curiosity.

"I deal with them," he answered, his face hardening.

She laughed softly.

"It strikes me you are an autocrat," she said, with emphasis.

"I have to rule this place for its owner," he answered. "And I've done so for twenty-five years. It's the best-conducted village in the county."

"But—somewhat on the lines of a penal settlement, eh?" she said. "The people don't seem to have much liberty, if they are to obey you in everything."

He looked at her, and his eyes grew almost childish with wonder.

"Liberty!" he exclaimed. "What do they know about liberty? Their place is to work, and to behave themselves. And while they're here, these London fellows must behave, Mrs. Esdaile, or out they go! I allow no breach of my rules."

"I'll speak to them—and be responsible for them," she said quietly.

"Thank you," said Gabriel, and went away satisfied.

There were no more complaints about the strangers, and presently they were gone, and great vanloads of furniture arrived, and very soon Mrs. Esdaile was installed in her new abode. She brought with her a distinctly feminine entourage—a companion who was youthful and pretty, an elderly cook who was sometimes seen at the side gate surveying the village green from above the battlements of calmly folded arms, and two maids who were neither of them under forty.

Of all people in this world, villagers—especially villagers in the north of England—are the most observant, and nothing delights them so much as observing the manners and customs of those strangers who may happen to take up an abode in their midst. To the folk of St. Lys-in-the-Wold the coming of Mrs. Esdaile was as the coming of a wandering menagerie or a travelling circus. She made her definite arrival on a Tuesday—by Thursday it was decided in solemn conclave at the Roan Cow, the general shop, and the smithy, three centres of debate not easily to be ignored, that she was a lady of wealth. On Sunday there was a greater inflowing than usual to the mildewed church; the people who usually worshipped of an afternoon went to their duties that Sunday in the morning, in the hope of seeing the lady of the house by the green for whom the sexton had prepared a special horse-box pew, on the ledge of which his granddaughter had set a bouquet of heavily smelling lilacs. That pew, situate immediately above a vault which was believed to contain the bones of some remote lords of the manor, had hitherto been kept sacred. There had always been an idea that the far-away Miss Can-

ning might some day come to see her own—if she did she would, of course, spend a Sunday in St. Lys and attend church in state. It had been with some misgivings that Gabriel Vandzavarte had broken through one link of his iron chain—but he knew that Miss Canning never would come and that Mrs. Esdaile was there. And so the cleaning out of the widespread, fusty-musty pew, and the setting in it of hassocks rescued from the vestry and the lilacs in an old china jug which would have fetched a small fortune anywhere but in Arcadia.

But Mrs. Esdaile did not go to church; neither did her companions nor her servants. The people crowded the church again in the afternoon, thinking that Mrs. Esdaile probably preferred late to early devotions. They were again disappointed. Toward evening the rumble of rumour ran thunderously round St. Lys. Behind the house on the green and its great belt of trees rose a low hill overgrown with hazel bushes. From this point of vantage one could see what went on in the elm-encircled garden. A Peeping Tom of the village, excused from church observance because he was half-witted and apt to utter the responses in their wrong places and to make audible comments on the vicar's remarks, had spent his Sabbath among the hazel bushes, espying from various points of vantage the doings in Mrs. Esdaile's newly gotten paradise. To begin with, she and the other lady had eaten their breakfasts out-of-doors. Then they had lain all about—sometimes on the grass, sometimes in nets suspended from trees. Sometimes they read books—sometimes papers. At one time they played tennis. They had their dinner out-of-doors too, and drank wine, and afterward smoked cigarettes. Then they went to sleep in the nets again, and when they woke they played more tennis until one of the maids

brought out tea. And the Peeping Tom, returning to his peep-holes after having refreshed himself at his mother's cottage, saw later in the evening, through open windows, a vision of fairyland, and heard music which woke strange echoes in his half-mad brain.

Gabriel Vandzavarte heard these things and wondered. The second Sunday came, but there was no appearance at church on the part of his new tenant or her people. He waited until the third Sunday had been and gone, and then he called at the house by the green and asked for its mistress.

"I am sorry I let this house to you, ma'am," he said, as soon as he was shown into her presence.

"Yes?" she said, arching her eyes. "But won't you sit down?"

Gabriel shook his head, watching her intently.

"Why don't you go to church?" he asked her.

"Because I never go where I don't want to go," she replied.

He remained silent for a while, still regarding her as one regards something one cannot quite understand, and at last he lifted his hand and began tugging at his red beard.

"You are breaking my rules," he said.

Mrs. Esdaile laughed.

"So you want to treat me as you threatened to treat the man from London who got drunk?" she said teasingly.

Gabriel continued to stroke his beard.

"I'm sorry," he said, "that I can't, ma'am. You've got the better of me. You've bested me, as we say hereabouts. You're safe in possession of this house for one-and-twenty years. But if I'd known . . ."

He paused abruptly, shaking his head still watching her.

"Yes—if I'd known," he murmured, as if to himself.

"If you'd known, you wouldn't have had me as a tenant?" she said mockingly.

He nodded his head at that.

"No—I wouldn't," he answered.

Mrs. Esdaile's manner suddenly changed. She rose from the desk at which she had been writing and faced him. The man and woman looked straight into each other's eyes.

"Well—why?" she said.

Gabriel Vandzavarte looked at her a long time before he replied to her question, never taking his eyes from hers. At last he raised his right hand and stroked his forehead from left to right in a restless fashion.

"I wish you'd never come here," he said. "You—you disturb me. You're the first man or woman that's ever crossed me. I thought, of course, when you came here that you'd—you'd——"

"Do as all the rest of the people under your rule do, I suppose?" she interrupted.

Gabriel nodded his head.

"I shall not!" she said. "Now—you know."

He continued to watch her, still rubbing his hand over his forehead.

"You'll do harm," he said at last. "If you don't go to church, and if you don't make——"

"What did you say?" she interjected. "Make?"

"I was going to say if you don't make your servants ——" he answered.

"Make my servants go to church!" she interrupted, with a laugh. "I don't believe in making anybody do anything. I suppose you make all the people in the village go to church, eh?"

"It's the rule," said Gabriel. "They've got to."

Mrs. Esdaile looked at her visitor fixedly for a full minute; he had never moved from his original position, and still stood there, a pillar of British bulldoggishness. She suddenly laughed, picked up a cigarette from a box on her writing table, lighted it, and sank into the nearest easy chair.

"Mr. Vandzavarte," she said, smiling at Gabriel as she had smiled at him when they drove away from his garden gate at their first meeting, "you're a revelation. I didn't think there was anybody living like you. What makes you like—what you are? For you're an awful bully. What right have you to tell these poor people that they must do this, mustn't do that?"

"I'm set over them," replied Gabriel. "If it were not for me they'd be nowhere. We've never had a pauper in St. Lys since I took hold."

She gazed at him from under close-drawn brows.

"Oh, that's how you look at it, is it?" she said. "Um —I begin to see things—a little. You are no doubt a staunch Tory, Mr. Vandzavarte?"

"I am a Conservative, ma'am," answered Gabriel.

"Well, I'm not," said Mrs. Esdaile. "I'm worse than the worsest Radical. I hate any sort of law and order— I'm a rebel. If I had my way, I'd pull down every church and chapel in the land and send every parson to Portland or to Broadmoor, which would be much more fitting. How would you like to see me in Parliament, Mr. Vandzavarte?"

Gabriel suddenly started out of his rigid position. He reached the door of Mrs. Esdaile's study in two great strides. Then he turned and faced her.

"Mrs. Esdaile," he said, "you're the first mistake I ever made in my life. But I give you fair warning, because I'm a fair man, if I seem a hard one: don't set

yourself against me in St. Lys, for if you do, you'll lose."

Then he went out, and Mrs. Esdaile threw away her cigarette, and, after staring at nothing for several minutes, lighted another.

"He's a real man, at any rate," she said to herself, after another long stare into vacancy. "A—real—man."

4

In the late autumn of the same year the member of Parliament for that division died, having held his seat without a dream of opposition for some forty years. No one who knew the constituency cherished any other belief than that his successor would be of his own colour—a Tory of the deepest shade of blue—and it was with feelings of shocked surprise that town and country folk alike heard that Colonel Everard, the deceased Parliamentarian's nephew and heir, was to be opposed in the Liberal interest by an unknown person named Amery, who, upon further investigation, turned out to be a London journalist, a mere writing person. True, it also transpired that he was a barrister, and incidentally a gentleman, but to the landed interest these things mattered little. To be unhorsed from a safe seat in the Commons is as bad as to be unhorsed after a long spell across country, and the suggestion of a possible fall is not pleasant to any party rapidly approaching senility. But those who knew the division smiled, and said that if this young gentleman cared to spend his money—or somebody else's—in fighting a hopeless battle—well, let him. Having said this, the knowing ones felt no more interest in the matter.

The people of St. Lys-in-the-Wold had never known

any interest in matters political in their lives. Until the year 1885 the majority of them had never had the power to vote—as there had been no elections since that year the power then given had never been exercised, and had a chance of exercising it occurred, it would have been exercised under Gabriel Vandzavarte's supervision. But now St. Lys woke up, for it turned out that Mr. Wilfred Amery was Mrs. Esdaile's cousin, and that he was going to make her house his headquarters, St. Lys being a good centre point for the division. From a placid, almost stagnant state of affairs the village suddenly woke up to something like feverish anxiety. There were comings and goings at the house by the green, and the folk of St. Lys became acquainted with many motor cars, while the post-mistress was obliged to apply for and to insist upon having much extra assistance. Short as the campaign must necessarily be, it promised, at any rate, a fortnight of glorious excitement.

Gabriel Vandzavarte heard the news, and frowned blackly. He was a Tory of the Tories, with no sympathy for modern Conservatism and no understanding of the new spirit in either party. That the men who worked for him and other farmers should have the privilege of recording their votes as if they were the equals of their employers seemed to him an iniquity and a foolishness. But since they had the votes and could use them, they must be instructed in their use. And so, one evening, he had all his own men called into the big kitchen in his farmhouse, and there he addressed them briefly.

"You'll have heard that there's going to be an election. All of you have a vote. When the day comes you'll go to the polling booth. The clerk will give you a paper, and on it you'll see two names—Everard and Amery.

You'll make a cross against Colonel Everard's name. If I hear of any man voting for Amery I shall turn him off, and he'll have to leave the village there and then. That's all I've got to say to you."

As that was Gabriel's usual method of issuing his commands, this laconic deliverance occasioned no surprise. But, ignorant though he was of the fact, there were murmurings among the men, the better-informed of whom knew that the vote by ballot was secret. Moreover, some of them, who read the newspapers, had begun to have ideas that the yellows would give them more than the blues, and that the time for coercion and bullying was past. And those who could trust each other began to talk in corners.

That war between the steward and the opposite party was bound to break out sooner or later was certain from the first. It broke out within a few days after the arrival of the Radical candidate. One fine afternoon there arrived in the village a bill poster and his assistant, laden with much paper and many brushes and paste pots. After refreshing themselves at the Roan Cow they set merrily to work, and within an hour or two St. Lys blazed forth in gaudy yellow and red. There was not a bare wall, an empty gable, nor a barn door giving on the street which was not covered with huge placards inviting the electorate to vote for Amery, and giving a hundred ingenious reasons why they should, if they wished to save the country from the dogs.

Gabriel Vandzavarte had been away on business that day; he drove into the village just as the bill poster and his man were finishing their task. When he came upon them in the very act of sticking up the last bill, and when he saw what they had done and looked down the street at the vista of yellow and red, his eyes were

not pleasant to confront. For a while he was ominously silent, regarding the offenders.

"Finished?" he said at last.

"Yes, sir; yes, Mr. Vandzavarte," answered the bill poster. "Just finished, sir."

"Then you can begin all over again," said Gabriel. "You can take every one of those papers down—at once."

The bill poster, who was dreaming of home and supper, gasped appealingly.

"But, sir; but, Mr. Vandzavarte——" he began.

"I say you take every one of those papers down before you leave this village," commanded Gabriel. "You know as well as I do that all this is private property, and that I can prosecute you for doing what you have done without permission. Now then, get to work—your paste's wet yet, and they'll come off easily, but off they come!"

The bill poster stared at Gabriel, at his man, and at the result of his afternoon's labour, and seemed like to burst into tears. Just then an open motor car came round the corner, and in it were seated Mrs. Esdaile, Mr. Amery, and the Liberal agent for the division. To the latter the bill poster made an appeal.

"Mr. Watson, sir—Mr. Watson!" he cried, "we've posted all the bills according to your orders, but Mr. Vandzavarte here says we've to pull them all down again. What's to be done, sir?"

The agent looked at his companions. Mr. Amery spoke.

"Surely, sir, you don't refuse a hearing to your political opponents?" he said.

Gabriel looked at the Liberal candidate with one of his fixed stares, and said nothing.

"Don't be—unjust, Mr. Vandzavarte," said Mrs. Esdaile. "The man has only done his duty."

Gabriel lifted his hat, but made no reply. He turned again to the bill poster.

"I've told you twice," he said, "to take all those papers down off this private property. If you don't do it at once I'll have them pulled down, and in that case I shall prosecute you and your man. Do you hear me?"

And the man heard, and, knowing that Gabriel was in the right, he began to undo his work, Gabriel watching him until the end, and making him clear up all the waste paper. That encounter he won easily.

But he was not to go on winning. Do what he could, he could not be here, there, and everywhere. He could not prevent Mrs. Esdaile from saying words in season to the men when she met them, nor Mrs. Esdaile's companion from distributing pamphlets and handbills and similar effusions at the cottage doors. Fume and fret about it in secret as he might, he was, after all, but one man, and could not stand sentinel over every free and enlightened elector of St. Lys. He had a vague fear that his power was slipping away from him, and he knew that it was Mrs. Esdaile who would rob him of it. He knew something more, too—he had fallen in love with her; fallen in love with the very woman whom Fate seemed to have sent to St. Lys with the special mission of destroying his authority. And what made it all the worse was the fact that he was then a middle-aged man who until that time had never been in love.

He made no attempt to deny the existence of this passion. He was an eminently truthful man, and he did not disguise from himself the fact that it thrilled his pulse, set his heart afire to see her, to hear her speak; he knew that he was always thinking about her, that she

came always between him and whatever he did. And yet there they were, fighting like cat and dog over—politics! He laughed bitterly at the mere notion of it. But sometimes (late at night), when he sat staring into the half-dead fire, he laughed much more bitterly when he said to himself, "Fool that I am!—to think that a woman like that could ever think of a man like me!" For, insistent and, in this way, bullying as Gabriel Vandzavarte was, he had, like all of his sex, soft spots—some of them so soft that you could have run them through with a bodkin.

5

The Waterloo of this war between two apparently antagonistic natures came three days before the election. St. Lys-in-the-Wold, although it had given shelter to the Liberal candidate, was, for electoral purposes, a place of small importance, and the agent, trained in conventional methods, thought there was no occasion to hold a meeting in its midst. It was Mrs. Esdaile who insisted upon a meeting on the village green—who insisted so strongly that her wishes were suddenly and most subserviently carried out. She would have her own way. That particular night there should be no other meetings in that quarter of the division—the great man of the Liberal Party who had been sent down to back up a forlorn hope should speak only at St. Lys—they would get helpers from other parts of the division—they would have such a meeting as the division had never known.

Then, woman-like, she made a mistake of a woman-like nature. She, too, in a way which she could not account for, was in love with Gabriel Vandzavarte—

thought about him, and wondered about him—and therefore, being wholly womanly, wanted to prove her strength to him. She had been deeply incensed—piqued, possibly—at his overbearing treatment of the bill poster, especially when she remembered that it had occurred in her presence and in that of her relative, the Liberal candidate. It had seemed to her that Gabriel had shown a studied indifference to her feelings, that he had purposely gone out of his way to let her see, or, perhaps, to make her see, that he not only thought scorn of her interference in the political arena, but was determined to show her that he was the stronger force. In short, he had flouted her—now she would flout him. And so she caused the platform from which the speeches were to be delivered to be set up exactly opposite the gates of Gabriel Vandzavarte's garden.

Gabriel might be, and was, lord of house and land in all St. Lys-in-the-Wold, but he was no better than the merest labourer when he stepped on the village green. That was the people's from time immemorial—it belonged to everybody. His heart grew very black within him when he saw this platform and heard of what was to happen. Then he, too, did a foolish thing. He rode into the nearest town, dictated a short and sharp paragraph to a printer, and returned within the course of the afternoon to St. Lys, with a thousand copies of an ultimatum which was literally flung in at the door of every house and cottage in the place. There were few words in it, but such as there were contained a peremptory notice that any tenant seen attending the Radical meeting would receive immediate notice to quit. In the case of ninety-nine of every hundred tenants that meant immediate dispersal of families within seven days.

Gabriel Vandzavarte rode out of his stable yard half an hour before the time fixed for the meeting to begin, and began his solitary patrol. But he had not reckoned on the sight which met his eyes. Mrs. Esdaile and her party had sent emissaries all over that part of the division, and there was a crowd of at least five thousand people there. If the men of St. Lys were among them they were too inextricably mixed up with the strangers to be easily identified; moreover, the meeting, cleverly enough, had been summoned for dusk, and only the speakers on the platform could be seen in the light of the spluttering naphtha lamps. Gabriel was foiled. But he was undaunted. He rode his horse to the edge of the great crowd, as near the platform as he could get, and listened to every word that fell from the speakers. In each speech there was reference to himself—sometimes bitter, sometimes sarcastic, sometimes calmly contemptuous. Gabriel heard it all in absolute silence. Those standing about him watched his face with inquisitive glances—he might have been an image of stone for any sign that he showed.

They looked at him much more inquisitively, much more narrowly, when, at the end of the meeting, Mrs. Esdaile rose to speak—to speak with a vigour and a fluency that electrified him and them. There was no mistaking the meaning of her message. She spoke with fiery enthusiasm of the oppression of village communities, of the tyranny of men who would allow no liberty of conscience, of the high-handed methods of those put in authority. And she wound up with a passionate appeal to the down-trodden to exercise their privileges as free citizens and to vote against the bad old system which made them into slaves.

As Mrs. Esdaile finished the crowd burst into fren-

zied cheering. But as it died away the clamour broke out anew, more deafeningly, but after a different manner. With a common impulse the great sea of dimly lighted faces turned on Gabriel Vandzavarte, and a roar of execration made the women listening at their cottages shudder with sudden fear.

Gabriel sat motionless until it was over. At last he moved his horse forward toward his house. An ill-conditioned fellow, evidently a coal miner from another part of the division, shouted a filthy jest at him and, lifting a stick, knocked his hat off. Then Gabriel's lips locked themselves very tightly, and his fingers closed round the heavy hunting crop which he carried. He bent from the saddle and felled his assailant to the ground, and in another minute was cutting his way to his stable yard through a cursing and groaning crowd.

He put the horse in its stable, went into his parlour, and lighted a cigar with steady fingers. Outside the crowd was still clamouring and howling at the garden wall.

6

On the day after the election Gabriel Vandzavarte was returning up the street of St. Lys when he met the chief constable of the district, who was coming quickly along from the market town in his dogcart. The chief constable pulled up at Gabriel's side.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Vandzavarte," he said. "I was just coming to call on you."

Gabriel looked a question.

"You've heard the result of the election, I suppose?" said the chief constable.

"Not I!" answered Gabriel.

"It was out at one o'clock," said the official. "The Liberal's in. Majority of over six hundred."

"Well?" said Gabriel. "You didn't want to see me about that, I suppose? If you did, you needn't have come."

The chief constable shook his head. He was plainly worried.

"Look here, Mr. Vandzavarte," he said. "I'm afraid, from what some of my men have overheard, that there may be trouble here to-night. You roused bitter enmity by slashing your way through the crowd the other night —there are two or three men whose faces bear the marks of your whip—and I've little doubt that if some of those Weatherton colliers get a drop of drink into them they'll come for you."

"Let them come," said Gabriel. "Good-day."

"No, but stop a bit, Mr. Vandzavarte," said the chief constable. "There's certain to be a big mob come home with Mr. Amery to Mrs. Esdaile's here. And you know what election crowds are—especially townsfolk and colliers. Keep within doors, Mr. Vandzavarte, if they come."

Gabriel's horse was moving, but he reined it in. He regarded the chief constable with cold, resolute eyes.

"I say, let them come!" he said. "I shall go in or out as I please. Good-day to you."

"I'm sending extra police!" called the chief constable as Gabriel rode away. "And——"

Gabriel rode on and vouchsafed no further answer. He was not afraid of any mob. Until the night of the meeting St. Lys had never seen a mob. And that mob had gone away more or less quietly.

But on this night, never since forgotten, St. Lys saw

such a mob as it had never dreamed of. The new member came home to Mrs. Esdaile's in great glory, escorted by the orderly and respectable of his supporters, whom he addressed from the carriage in which they had drawn him and his cousin through the village street. As this crowd was melting away, in orderly enough fashion, and as dusk fell over farmstead and cottage, the mob came in from the direction of the coal fields. It was a good thousand strong, and it was bent on having its own way. And the police, seeing and hearing it, began to feel that nasty sort of uneasiness which the few must feel when confronted by the many with the devil in them.

The mob fell on the Roan Cow first, and in half an hour there was not a pint of liquor left in bar or cellar. Then they marched, a shouting, cursing, blasphemous gang, to the green. Those who could get a glimpse of what was in their midst saw that some of them carried a rude effigy on a ladder, some bundles of straw, some cans full of tar or pitch.

They were going to burn Gabriel Vandzavarte's counterfeit presentment before his own house. And they swept away the police as if they had been straws, and poured over the night-canopied green like demons dragging a condemned soul to the flames. In their midst at last a bright flame shot up, and in the fresh wind great sparks went flying away like fireflies. And the chief constable, powerless and fit to weep with rage, saw where the sparks were going.

Mrs. Esdaile was giving a grand supper party in honour of her cousin's magnificent victory. The house by the green was full of laughter and gaiety and general congratulation, when suddenly a white-faced constable burst into the dining room and brought every man there to his feet.

"For God's sake come, gentlemen! Mr. Vandzavarte's farmstead's on fire!"

When the men had rushed out Mrs. Esdaile went upstairs and looked across the green from her drawing room windows. What she saw turned her sick with horror and apprehension. In the middle of the green the wretched effigy, deserted and untended, was burning itself out; fifty yards away Gabriel Vandzavarte's well-filled stackyard, which she knew to contain over threescore stacks of wheat, barley, oats, and hay, was already blazing angrily to the sky, whose starlight its brilliance had put out. And all around it surged the mob—black figures against the red sheet of licking flame.

She stood there transfixed—stood, it seemed to her, for hours. She saw the fire spread from the stackyard to the stables, the granaries, the barns, and at last to the house. And at that she threw herself into the nearest chair and burst into tears, for she knew how Gabriel Vandzavarte had loved the rooftree of his forefathers.

But the fire ate its way through everything. The night winds fanned its flames, and there was no water at hand where there had once been too much, and the nearest fire engines were miles and miles away. The men of Mrs. Esdaile's house party came back with the gray morning, begrimed, dishevelled, exhausted. Some of the old furniture, some of the family heirlooms had been dragged out of the house, but all else was lost, and horses had been burned alive in their stables and cattle in their stalls.

Mrs. Esdaile put on a cloak and went across the green to the smoking, evil-smelling ruins. She found Gabriel Vandzavarte standing in the midst of what had once been his garden. His arms were tightly locked across his chest; his eyes were fixed on the scene before him, so

pitiless, so cruel in its aspect. She went up and touched him gently on the arm.

"Speak to me!" she said.

He turned and looked at her attentively.

"Your work!" he said. "You set it going."

She stepped back and looked at him appealingly.

"You might just as well have put the torch to the pile yourself," he went on. "I—knew what it meant to set things going—people who aren't fit. And——"

"Yes?" she said, when he had paused some time. "Yes?"

He sighed and turned away.

"I wouldn't have cared," he said, "if I hadn't loved you. That—hurts, worse than this."

He was moving off, but she stepped up to him and laid her hand on his arm again.

"Then," she said in a whisper, "I can do something to atone."

She saw his face change as he looked at her and gathered her meaning.

"Is that true?" he said.

She slipped her hand down his charred sleeve into his smoke-blackened fingers.

"Yes," she answered.

Gabriel Vandzavarte kept the hand given him. He looked at her long and steadily, bowed his head, and then turned to the devastating fire again.

"Perhaps it was my fault," he said slowly. "I may have been—blind. I must think about it—we must both think about it. And now we shall think together."

THE END

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